

**“If I Speak False”:**  
**Reading the Oppositional in Peter Carey’s**  
***True History of the Kelly Gang***

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**Master of Arts**  
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“If I Speak False”:  
Reading the Oppositional in Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang*

By

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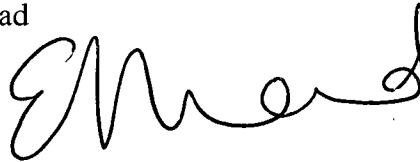
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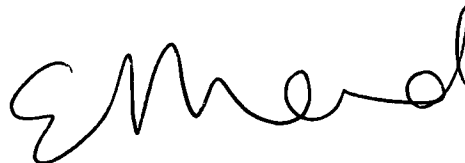
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## **Abstract**

### **“If I Speak False”: Reading the Oppositional in Peter Carey’s**

#### ***True History of the Kelly Gang***

#### **Master of Arts**

My thesis offers a detailed textual analysis of Peter Carey’s Booker Prize-winning novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Adopting a postcolonial approach, the thesis uses Carey’s representation of an iconic Australian hero as a conduit to questions of racial identity in the so-called reconciling nation. Its arguments stem from two major theoretical underpinnings: Alan Lawson’s Second World theory, which designates settler nations such as Australia as “suspended between ‘mother’ and ‘other’, simultaneously colonized and colonizing,” and Ross Chambers’ theory of narrative oppositionality in his book *Room For Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative*. The thesis argues that Carey’s text works hard to affect a change to the white Australian reader’s economy of desire, and to open up a space for an alternative mode of national belonging – one that replaces the “sorry” nation’s discourse of atonement with what Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs call a “mutual (dis)possession” of its cultural and geographical spaces.

The thesis is organised according to what I see as the text’s most compelling and potentially subversive oppositional strategies. Chapter One establishes a reading practice that resists the tendency among many Carey critics to too casually engage the terms

“postcolonial” and “postmodern.” Chapter Two uses the trope of the motherland to explore the relationship between racial and sexual identity in Australian settler discourse: as a fiercely contested site of gendered and racial legitimacy, the motherland provides a means to imagine a more subversive sexual landscape in which neither mother nor land is virginal. Chapter Three uses *True History*’s intertextual relationship with Shakespeare’s *Henry V* as a starting point for examining the relationship between theatre and history. It argues that Carey’s confusing deployment of theatre as a textual discourse and a narrative practice – and the entanglement of both with questions of historical agency – compels the reader to consider the ideological function of theatre and spectatorship in *True History of the Kelly Gang*, as well as in other kinds of colonial and postcolonial histories. Chapter Four deploys critical discourses of postcolonial melancholia to analyse the text’s engagement with convict memory and settler guilt. In this final chapter, I consider the uneasy cohabitation between psychoanalysis and postcolonialism as a provocative metaphor for the text’s oppositional failures and successes.

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I am, as always, grateful for the love of my friends and enormous family. I am especially grateful to Malcolm and Rae Wells and my mum Lesley Rogers for supporting my studies and always being there for me.

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### **“If I Speak False”: Introduction**

The point, then, without doubt,  
is to change the world.

Ross Chambers

I lost my own father at 12 yr. of age  
and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences  
my dear daughter you are presently too young  
to understand a word I write  
but this history is for you and will contain no single lie  
may I burn in Hell if I speak false.

Peter Carey

These first sentences of Ross Chambers' *Room For Maneuver* and Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) seem, in their wider contexts, fundamentally incompatible: while the former takes as its premise the postmodern dissolution of "Truth" (xiv), the latter is ostensibly invested in its recovery. In his opening declaration to his daughter, Carey's Ned Kelly stakes a claim for authentic speech that resonates through the "thirteen parcels of stained and dog-eared papers" (2). For Chambers, on the other hand, there is no authentic speech, because language is subject to endless (mis)reading; reading, in turn, is the name for the phenomenon that has the power to produce a change to the way people desire, and therefore, to "the way things are" (xii). In the post-revolutionary world, he argues, oppositional narrative offers a means to affect social change without violence, to manoeuvre within the room that opens up between repression and recuperation. These characteristics of address "imply reading as a mode of reception inscribed *without closure* in time, and hence history" (3).

It is precisely the ongoing readability of literary discourse – its propensity to transcend time and history – that draws into focus the oppositional potential of *True*



*History*. “How queer and foreign [my story] must seem to you,” Ned tells his daughter at its outset, “[because] all the coarse words and cruelty which I now relate are far away in ancient time” (5). The conflicting temporal realms of “now” and “ancient time” converge in the novel, and the effect is to circumvent the foreclosure of not only historical “truth,” but also textual meaning: Ned explicitly signposts the ongoing readability of his words “at a later date and in changed historical circumstances,” by a readership that is “the true object” of his address (Chambers 2). Unlike oppositional behaviour, which works to strengthen prevailing hegemonic systems by “making them livable” (7), oppositional narrative discovers a power to “*change its other*” – the reader – through the “achievement and maintenance of authority, in ways that are potentially radical” (11).

In what ways does *True History* achieve and appropriate its sources of nationalist, racial and gendered authority, and, crucially, can its effects be potentially radical? This thesis is concerned with what Chambers calls power and the power to oppose, a defining paradox of oppositional narrative that is particularly suggestive of the double inscription of settler space. Literature itself is a paradoxical social utility: as a “piggyback” for the disempowered, or, in postcolonial terms, a conduit for subaltern speech, it necessarily reinscribes its own power and privilege (4). The authority of the oppositional settler text, therefore, is doubly fraught. The particular applicability of narrative theory to settler literature is exemplified by the Court Poet-Wild Child dialectic, which Chambers borrows from David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* (1978). Chambers argues that

if literature is simultaneously “Court Poet” and “Wild Child,” it has at its disposal *joint* modes of seduction that can flatter the powerful and (or) empower the excluded. So any either/or, here, is very much a function of a both/and: the “Court Poet” implies (and implicates) the “Wild Child”; while the “Wild Child,” in turn, cannot do without the “Court Poet.” (14)

*True History*’s significant commercial and cultural capital<sup>1</sup> is largely the result of a partnership between Peter Carey, “national prophet” (Graeme Turner 132), and Ned Kelly, anti-imperial icon; a partnership, in other words, between the Court Poet and the Wild Child of Australian nationalism. More importantly, as a work of settler literature, it is already a Court Poet-Wild Child, in the sense that it draws on “*two* kinds of authority and *two* kinds of authenticity” (Lawson 12): the imperial and the indigenous. In his popular incarnation as the wild colonial boy, Ned Kelly embodies the colonialist construction of Australia as the deviant child of an imperial motherland; he also, more dangerously, has the propensity to occupy the place of the indigenous in postcolonial discourse. The thesis is concerned with accounting for the way in which Carey’s text turns against its own doubly-derived sources of racial authority. *True History* reveals the co-habitation of the Court Poet and the Wild Child in oppositional narrative, and at the same time, the co-habitation of gender and race, past and present, primitivism and modernity in postcolonial Australia.

Ned’s opening address to his daughter signposts these political investments, and establishes a framework for enabling *True History*’s oppositional technologies. Firstly, he tells her that the primary objective of his narrative is to resist the “lies and

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<sup>1</sup> *True History* won the Booker Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2001, and is one of Carey’s most commercially successful works to date.

silences” perpetuated by official accounts of his life, and also to impart the truth of “the injustice we poor Irish suffered in this present age” (5). The first chapter of this thesis comes to terms with *True History*’s postmodern and postcolonial concern with questioning the lies and silences of imperial history. Criticism of Carey’s work has tended to overlook the complexities of Australian settler postcolonialism, or to allow them to be eclipsed by the author’s spectacular postmodern aesthetic: in succumbing to the “evolutionary fallacy” (Stevenson 399) of identity criticism, some critics threaten to nullify or invert the political efficacy of the text. More specifically, the chapter argues that Carey uses the trope of Ned’s mutually constitutive corporeal-textual body to produce an oppositional message, one that is written in the language of the very nationalism it defies.

As a settler narrative, *True History* necessarily perpetuates its own lies and silences; ironically, these are highlighted by Ned’s claim that the narrative represents the collective suffering of “we poor Irish” (5). As an Irish Catholic, Ned Kelly’s pseudo-racial otherness works to symbolically harmonise the settler subject with the indigene and the land it represents; however, in the context of what Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs call “uncanny Australia,” *True History* is less invested in Ned’s indigenisation than in exposing and interrupting his indigenising impulse. The atoning implications of twenty-first-century discourses of reconciliation come to the fore in Chapter Two, which explores Carey’s representation of Ned’s thwarted desire for a feminised and unhomely Australian motherland.

The “you” to whom Ned’s “history” is addressed performs a crucial oppositional function. He writes, “God willing I shall live to see you read these words

to witness your astonishment...” (5), and in doing so, compels the reader to similarly gaze upon the daughter as she reads her father’s words. Chapter Three argues that the reader’s voyeuristic intrusion on this one-sided conversation replicates the performative narrative structure of oppositional literature, which in turn clears a space for an oppositional reading of the text’s complex theatrical tropes. The chapter reads the intertextual relationship between *True History* and another Court Poet-Wild Child narrative, Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, as emblematic of the relationship between theatre and history.

The final chapter tightens its focus on a more explicitly performative trope: cross-dressing. Ned’s first words to his daughter – “I lost my own father at 12 yr. of age” (5) – refer to his father’s death, but more subtly, to his secret membership in the cross-dressing Irish rebel group the Sons of Sieve. On discovering his father’s “cursed dress” (21) buried in a trunk in the back yard, Ned is overcome with homophobic horror, and even after he discovers the (heteronormative) story behind the dress, cannot fully forgive him. The chapter reads the text’s literal and figurative cross-dressing as symptomatic of postcolonial melancholia: the phenomenon whereby the present is locked in the paralysing grip of its colonial past. Rather than facilitating the forgiveness of the settler nation, *True History* represents postcolonial melancholia as a secret social contagion that passes between the transracial and transsexual bodies of Ned Kelly and his gang.

Postcolonial melancholia is structurally homologous with the act of reading itself, which Chambers describes as an “act of self recognition” (235); like the reader of oppositional narrative, the subject of postcolonial melancholia recognises the self in

the other, and experiences an irreversible change to his or her “landscape of desire” (245). Readers already “predisposed” (242) to an appeal to the readerly activity of interpretation will facilitate a split between the narrative and textual functions of an oppositional text: the former “respects the power structure [and] serves as a form of disguise for a ‘textual function’ whose operation is more covert, but ultimately more significant” (13). Potentially, readers of *True History* are seduced away from their identification with its narrative function, the discourse of patriarchal Australian nationalism, in order to activate its textual function. The precise nature of this textual function is the overarching concern of the thesis. *True History*’s “point,” I argue, is not to change the world, but to speak false of its own nationalist hegemonies, and to therefore produce some kind of change in the reader. And as Chambers points out, “what has once changed, however minimally, cannot be unchanged” (13).

## Chapter 1

### “Tattooed Onto My Living Skin”: Reading Ned Kelly’s Postcolonial Body

In a celebratory assessment of *True History*, Andreas Gaile praises Carey for his ability to counteract subaltern silence – a project he describes without irony as “lend[ing] an ear to the marginalized ‘little man’” – by inserting Ned Kelly’s story “into the grand narrative of history” (“Re-Mythologising” 38). Gaile’s essay concludes with an expression of gratitude for this act of artistic benevolence, which he believes supplies those nascent “down under” cultures “with what they most obviously lack – a national mythology” (39). This sense of fascination and affection for a pubescent Antipodes is characteristic of Gaile’s work: elsewhere, he celebrates Carey’s ability to help Australian culture to “grow and mature ... [and] seem less provisional” (“Towards” 34) and to translate the “sometimes ungraspable Antipodean reality into more familiar terms” (49). The assumption of imperial authority inherent in the evolutionary fallacy of Gaile’s critique is so blatant as to deflect serious critical engagement. Yet such readings serve to demonstrate the ease with which Carey’s fiction can be appropriated by a nationalist agenda that is steeped in the imperial power it ostensibly opposes: to reveal, in Alan Lawson’s words, the “doubled teleology” of the settler text (14).

Carey’s particularly precarious postcoloniality – that which, as Gaile rightly suggests, cannot be disengaged from his complicity with “the dominant discursive regimes of his society” (“Introduction” xxvii) – demands a more rigorous assessment than is apparent even in the most nuanced responses to *True History*. Graham Huggan,

for instance, identifies a dangerously conservative undercurrent to *True History*'s "creative revisioning" (153). He suggests that for many Australians, the Kelly story is "embarrassingly exclusive" of histories of Aboriginal genocide and dispossession (149), and that the popularity of Kelly folklore can potentially be read not as an expression of cultural remembering, but as "a form of collective repression" that eases anxieties about Australia's multi-ethnic society (153). Despite his concern with the falsely inclusive tendencies of cultural memory, Huggan locates *True History*'s postcolonialism in its willingness to join "a wider historical struggle to counteract those nostalgia-ridden narratives of sanctified victimhood which continue to block access to Australia's colonial past" (153). More troubling is Annette Kern-Stähler's suggestion that *True History* balances out the absence of Aboriginal histories with its "perspective on the colonial oppression of the Irish" (244): it is precisely this apparent substitution of one kind of colonial oppression for another that has the potential to distort *True History*'s postcolonialism, or utterly invert it. Susan Martin argues that Carey's text, which she provocatively re-names "Search for the White Male Heterosexual Hero" (24), perpetrates the most dangerous kind of national amnesia: "Kelly is a figure who can still be made as Other to Australian identity, and therefore innocent of Australian transgressions against land and the property of the Aborigines" (35). Her suggestion that the text effectively replaces concerns of sexuality, gender and race with "a National uncertainty" (38) of Kelly's status as hero or villain is supported by some critical responses to the text. Laurie Clancy, for instance, is sceptical of Carey's "perpetuation of the comfortable and undisturbing" Kelly myth, but only because the historical Ned Kelly was "far more complex" (58), and Xavier Pons

concludes an insightful delineation of Carey's hyperrealist strategies with familiar nationalist rhetoric: "Carey's imagination nourishes that of his fellow Australians [by departing from] strict adherence to the known facts about [Kelly]" (72).

Criticism of *True History* tends to almost unconsciously slip into debates about the historical reality and nationalist significance of the Kelly story, and while these debates are valuable, they rest uneasily alongside its designation as "classically postcolonial" (Kerr 191). These critical preoccupations are partly due to the novel's dazzling postmodern aesthetic: its relentless interplay of history and literature, truth and lies, realism and hyperrealism is so overwhelming as to discourage a theoretically rigorous postcolonial reading. While this aesthetic demands critical attention, its conflation with the text's postcolonial politics is methodologically and ideologically untenable. Paul Kane's article "Postcolonial/Postmodern: Australian Literature and Peter Carey" explicates the theory that "in Peter Carey's work the postmodern is the postcolonial" (522). More broadly, Kane's is a significant contribution to Carey criticism. But in their ostensibly interchangeable formulation as a "pocomo blend" (Gaile, "Introduction" xxv), postcolonialism and postmodernism become ideologically trivialised and politically defunct. *True History*'s potentially potent "pocomo blend" – which must be more patiently expounded if it is to bear the cultural weight of Carey's Kelly – is artfully dramatised in the following passage:

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 1879 the Kelly Gang rode to Jerilderie to renew our cash reserves from the coffers of the Bank of New South Wales. My 58 pages to the government was secured around my body by a sash so even if I



were shot dead no one could be confused as to what my corpse would say if it could speak.

It would be hard to find so much as a Chinaman who has not heard how the Kellys controlled Jerilderie for an entire weekend. Personally I read in 6 different newspaper accounts that we planned it better than a military campaign. Well its no good having a dog & barking too so I will stick this one cutting down for you but please imagine my feelings during the events here described. My 58 pages was pinching & cutting me I could feel them words being tattooed onto my living skin. (417)

According to Tony Ballantyne, the imperial archive is “a site saturated by power, a dense but uneven body of knowledge scarred by the cultural struggles and violence of the colonial past” (102). If, as Ballantyne’s metaphor suggests, colonial knowledge and power converge in history’s textual and corporeal bodies, the above passage acts as a useful starting point for delineating the boundaries of *True History*’s postcolonialism.

Most obviously, the image is suggestive of the commodified cultural landscape from which Carey’s Kelly emerges. In securing Ned’s letter to his corpse to avoid historical “confus[ion],” Carey playfully signals his own complicity in the national obsession with trying to peer inside the iconic metal helmet. In this moment, *True History* willingly assumes its prescribed position in “Kellymania,” the cultural marketing phenomenon that has packaged, processed and perpetuated the Kelly myth since the end of the nineteenth century. As Huggan suggests, the quantity of Kelly material available on the market “testifies not just to the durability of the legend, but also to its continuing profitability as a commodity circulating within an increasingly

globalised memory industry” (143). More specifically, the passage draws attention to the way the Kelly story is not so much remembered as membered: predominantly manifested as a (gendered, sexualised) body. In the wake of Sidney Nolan’s 1946-47 series of paintings, “Ned’s helmet ... has become his face” (Ingram 12) and Kellymania has taken the form of an obsession with his body and its material extensions – the iconic helmet, as well as his skull, stolen from the Old Melbourne Gaol in 1978, the inauthentic portraits of his face, and, most recently, the skeleton which allegedly disappeared from Victoria’s Pentridge Prison in May 2007 (“Kelly’s Skeleton Missing” 4). For Martin, the nation’s obsession with Kelly’s body reveals a vicarious desire to stabilise its own sexuality and whiteness (32), yet arguably, the above passage inscribes a more ambivalent meaning on Kelly’s cultural corpus.

Carey blatantly displays his cultural and commercial investment in the “holy relics” (Martin 31) of Kellymania by signalling *True History*’s intertextual relationship with the Jerilderie Letter. In 2006, the “National Treasures from Australia’s Great Libraries” exhibition, funded by the Council of Australian Libraries, toured Australia’s capital cities: displayed alongside iconic cricketer Donald Bradman’s bat, a copy of Peter Carey’s *Theft* (2006) and Kelly’s helmet was the famous Jerilderie Letter – a holy relic of Kellymania second only to the legendary armour, and perhaps the closest its devotees will get to the cultural deity himself. To circumvent the loss of irony on the readers of *True History* who happened not to have “heard how the Kellys controlled Jerilderie for an entire weekend” (417), Carey repeatedly referred to the intertextual significance of the Jerilderie Letter in the interviews that accompanied the book’s release. The absurdity of the notion that Carey can faithfully ventriloquise an

authentic historical voice is extra-textually accentuated by the fact that, because the historical Kelly was illiterate, the Letter was actually dictated to and written in the hand of gang member Joe Byrne, and textually accentuated by Ned's expression of regret that "[his] Jerilderie Letter were lost forever" (433). In this context, the image of the defiant Ned galloping to Jerilderie and onto the next page of Australian national history seduces the reader with its postmodern ambivalence about that history, its simultaneous refusal and embrace.

The discursive instability of this passage, its ambiguous disrespect for historical veracity, is metonymic of *True History*'s disorientating postmodernity. The scene of Ned's gallant gallop to Jerilderie performs postmodernism's dialectical exchange between truth and untruth, history and literature, in a way that imagines these concepts to be as interchangeable as Ned's corporeal and textual selves. Postmodern theory calls into question the relationship between history and literature: as Roland Barthes established in the 1960s, the realist novel and narrative history share a common desire to construct a narrative world that is transparently representative of history, but somehow separate from the historical process itself. Hayden White's question about the fictionality of historical representation – "How ... can any 'past,' which is by definition comprised of events, processes, structures, and so forth that are considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an 'imaginary' way?" (33) – seems to resonate in *True History*'s formal structures. Its central literary conceit – the invention of the daughter for whom the narrative is written – epitomises Diane Elam's argument that the figure of the woman in postmodern romance fiction offers a conduit through which the past can be

remembered. “Woman,” Elam writes, “may permit the past to be represented as romance, but the price of this is that she herself cannot be adequately represented” (16). The narrative is embedded in a repertoire of reality effects so obsessively authentic as to draw attention to its own artifice. The disembodied voice of archival authority, for instance, informs the reader at the outset that the product at hand is not the first chapter of Peter Carey’s Booker Prize-winning novel, but “45 sheets of medium stock (8” x 10” approx.) with stabholes near the top where at one time they were crudely bound” (3). This pervasive hyperrealism does not simply facilitate the deconstruction of history and literature’s institutional and discursive boundaries, but rather exposes them as already inherently paradoxical.

Carey’s endeavour to undermine the very discourses through which his narrative is enabled is exemplary of what Linda Hutcheon has termed historiographic metafiction. This sub-genre of postmodern fiction is characterised by a compulsion to play on the truth and lies of traditional historiography in order to undermine its totalising order, and by a focus on “the process of *attempting* to assimilate” historical data into the fictional narrative (114). This operates most obviously in Carey’s use of newspaper clippings from the 1880s, which are regularly inserted into the narrative as points of contrast between Ned’s lived historical reality and that of authorised historical discourse. This tension is apparent in Ned’s telling of the story of the Jerilderie campaign to his daughter, in which he includes a fragment of newspaper text to avoid the unnecessary act of “having a dog and barking too” (417), and his comment to her that he “personally ... read in 6 different newspaper accounts that [the gang] planned it better than a military campaign” gestures to the impossibility of accessing

the reality of past events in any other than a textualised form. Carey's strategy is reminiscent of Fredric Jameson's response to the 1960s "crisis" of historical representation, in which he argues that "the historian should reformulate her vocation – not any longer to produce some vivid representation of History 'as it really happened,' but rather to produce the *concept* of history" (180). Ned's own commentary and corrections interject on the newspaper cutting he sticks down for his daughter, and his collage of competing historical discourses exemplifies his desire not to reject historical empiricism, but to draw attention to its elisions and inadequacies.

Indeed, the narrative is founded in Ned's desire to offer his daughter an alternative to official accounts of his life, which demonise him as "the Mansfield Murderer" (401, 409). His opening truth claim – "[I] know what it is to be raised on lies and silences ... may I burn in Hell if I speak false" (5) – sets his authoritative speaking position in opposition to the "lies and silences" of imperial history, and reveals a characteristically postmodern and postcolonial concern with questioning "*whose* truth gets told" (Hutcheon 123). The opening claim establishes an intense focus on issues of speech and silence that pervades the narrative: Ned's coarsely poetical voice – less an expression of subaltern speech than of what Edward Kamau Brathwaite calls "nation language" (21) – is, within its own narrative realm, continually denied access to the public sphere. Paradoxically, as Ned's obsessive, almost pathological desire for authentic speech intensifies, he can express to his daughter the pain of dispossession – "NOT ONE WOULD PRINT MY ACTUAL WORDS" (413) – and the violent pleasure of resistance: "I could not be silenced ... I were the terror of the government being brung to life in the cauldron of the night" (429-30).

During the gallop to Jerilderie, Ned facilitates a corporeal counter-inscription that mimics the inscription of imperial power on the body of its subjects. Throughout *True History*, historical dispossession and subversive self-representation are expressed in an extended metaphor of the body, which acts as a conduit for Ned's traumatic memory and as a canvas for his textual self-construction. He imagines his unrepresentable public subjectivity as an experience of physical violation – “my words had been stolen from my very throat” (413) – and his compulsive urge to textualise his subjectivity is also viscerally experienced. Immediately prior to the Jerilderie scene he fumes that “nothing give [him] no relief” from his bodily discomforts but “the ceaseless labour with [his] pen” (416). White ants crawl around his nose and mouth and imaginary rats “[tear] at his guts” as he writes his “58 pages” for “the attention of the government”: his longing for self-representation, to “[make] known ... the history of the police and their mistreatment of [his] family,” is such that he “could not bear to be inside [his] skin” (416-17). The night before the siege at Glenrowan in which Ned's armour transforms him into “the ----- Monitor” (470), he dreams of his painful childhood experiences at Avenel Common School, where the cruel Mr. Irving denied him the role of ink monitor on the grounds of his Irishness: “I see Mr. Irving finally made you the monitor [his mother] smiled. Looking down at myself I seen the ink on my hands & up my arms it were bleeding down my shirt” (451). The dream, with its graphic representation of historical silence as a trauma emerging from within the body, makes explicit the mutually constitutive relationship between Ned's corporeal and textual selves.

The precariousness of Ned's self-representation is graphically revealed in the siege that follows, in which the omniscient narrator metaphorically unpeels the Monitor's metal skin to discover "a man of ... shattered bone with blood squelching in his boot" (470). The suffering, bleeding body beneath the fleetingly transcendental armour serves as a reminder of the violence of colonial power: ultimately, the schoolteacher Thomas Curnow takes possession of Ned's autonomous selfhood by stealing the manuscripts and hence "ripp[ing] out the creature's bloody heart" (460). Curnow's violent fantasy and the image of the bleeding body beneath the armour foreground the abjection of Ned's corporeal and textual selves, which are deeply endangering and endangered in the climax of the narrative, as well as in the scene of the gallop to Jerilderie. In this moment, the body is literally under threat in the sense that it may be "shot dead" and hence become a "corpse" (417), but it is even more so in the sense that it is attempting to imprint a coherent subjectivity onto history. Ned's text operates as a shield wrapped around his body, standing not only between him and a bullet but between him and silence, and hence defending this part of Australian cultural heritage from a deadly onslaught of imperial hegemony. It is due to the subversive nature of this act that Curnow finds the stolen parcels "disgusting to his touch": his "very skin [shrinks]" from the "rank and ignorant" speech of the colonial subject (460). The dispossession of the text must therefore be complemented by an attack on the body of its author: "*And then they were on him like a pack of dingoes. They ripped him, kicked him, cried that they would shoot him dead*" (471). This imagery serves as a reminder that postcolonial struggles manifest not just in the rhetorical but also in the very real and violent realm – in this case, in the form of a

republican uprising against the British government. That Ned's text functions to shield both his individual body and his grander role in a battle against an imperial force is made clear in the references to his Jerilderie "military campaign" (417), which evokes the ethos of republicanism many scholars have identified in the Jerilderie Letter itself.

The problematics of *True History*'s postcolonialism are thrown into relief by this nationalist rhetoric. The manner in which Ned's subversive text is "tattooed onto [his] living skin" (417) draws attention to the Foucauldian notion that social power is "tattooed indelibly on [its] subject[s]" (Grosz 67). Elizabeth Grosz argues that social power produces the "intextuated body" (72), which is "fictionalised and positioned within those myths that form a culture's social narratives and self-representations" (66). As Grosz notes, the body is a site of knowledge and power, but also of resistance, for it is capable of being self-marked in alternative ways (64). In this context, Ned's body functions as a palimpsest of competing representation: his subversive textual layer "pinch[es] and cut[s]" his skin as it struggles to possess his body. However, Grosz also argues that the intextuated body is read as an external symptom of an authentic "inner depth" (73), a "secret or private" selfhood that lies beneath the skin (70). If Ned resists the process by which his body is read in the system of social meaning that is imperial history, his attempt at self-inscription can be seen as an attempt to locate an authentic, "true & secret ... history" (Carey 266) of white Australia. *True History* potentially perpetuates its own, equally destructive lies and silences by locating an authentic white Australian selfhood, bleeding but defiant, beneath Ned Kelly's mythologised metal helmet. Chris Prentice has argued that the metaphors of the body, with its putatively natural needs and desires, are used in New Zealand historical literature to respond to a



Pakeha crisis of legitimacy and belonging. She suggests that the body is used to “elide that history which generated the crisis of post-colonizing legitimacy” (89) and justify Pakeha arrival as part of its “apparently anarchic appetites and contingencies” (92). Prentice persuasively problematises the distinction between “the local body ‘at home’ and the unhomely inscriptions of inauthentic imperialism on the colonial (body-)territory” (102): the distinction, in other words, between the history of the naturalised and nationalised settler and the history of imperialism. If *True History* can function as postcolonial, Ned’s inscription of his body must be read as the inscription of the “(body-)territory” of the settler subject, as a self-conscious attempt to represent the “local” white Australian body “at home.”

For Lawson, settler nations such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand constitute the Second World in the sense that they are

caught between the *two* First worlds – two origins of authority and authenticity – the originating World of Europe, the Imperium, the originator of its principle cultural authority; and that ‘other’ First World, that of the First Nations whose authority they not only replaced and effaced but also desired. (16)

Lawson’s reading of settler texts as sites “where the *processes* of colonial power as *negotiation*, as a transaction of power” are “made most intensely visible” (2, 5) is evocative of Chambers’ theorisation of oppositional literature. Chambers argues that oppositional room for manoeuvre opens at the site at which the power structures of a piece of writing, the relationship between its narrative and textual functions, are made visible to the reader. The “both/and situation” of oppositional literature (4) – its

“certain textual duplicity” that hinges on the production of “an ‘other’ meaning” of its authoritarian discourse (16) – is consonant with the doubled teleology of the settler text, which “must speak *of and against* both its own oppressiveness and its own oppression” (Lawson 15). In the space of the settler text, appropriation implies the “suppression or effacement of the indigene and the concomitant indigenisation of the settler” (14); but it also implies the oppositional phenomenon of “*acquired* authority” (Chambers 3), “the turning of the discourse of power to the purposes of oppositional (textual) seduction” (46).

In *True History* – a text that can easily be appropriated to the nationalist agendas that in turn seek to appropriate indigenous authenticity – Ned’s gallop to Jerilderie renders its internal power structures intensely visible, and transforms appropriation into appropriative irony. If appropriation, in both senses, is about turning the authority of the other to “other” purposes, truth can be seen as the “supreme authority claim” (Chambers 91); in framing the pathological truth claims of Ned’s history in an archival discourse that is spectacularly fictional, Carey demands that his text be read against the grain of its own hegemonic nationalist authority. The image of Ned Kelly’s speaking corpse does more than emplace a “pocomo blend” and “lend an ear to the marginalised ‘little man’”: it propels readers from their role as the passive recipients of post-colonising, nationalist discourse and requires them to participate in the construction of *True History*’s oppositional meanings. These meanings, tattooed onto the living skin of the ultimate Australian icon, work to distort the “*unhomely* – uncanny – correspondences” (Prentice 90) between the discourses of empire and the discourses of the settler text.

## Chapter 2

### **“A Stranger’s Territory”: The Motherland Trope**

Is Kelly’s Irishness a kind of “white” blackness,  
transformable into whiteness?

Susan Martin

The issue of Ned’s transformable whiteness is evident from the opening paragraphs of his narrative, which establish a relationship between his claim to an authentic speaking position and his experience of racial otherness. Its opening assertion of authenticity, “may I burn in Hell if I speak false,” is itself a reflection of Kelly’s Irish Catholicism; this is immediately followed by a statement of intent: to educate his daughter in “the injustice we poor Irish suffered in this present age” (5). The conflict between the “poor Irish” and their colonial masters – Scottish and Protestant Irish, as well as the English – manifests throughout the text as explicitly racial. At school, Ned’s Irishness marks his difference and frustrates his pervasive desire to command written English: “Them scholars was all proddies they knew nothing about us save Ned Kelly couldnt spell he had no boots ... they learned from Mr Irving that all micks was a notch beneath the cattle” (33-34). The impact on Ned’s life is devastating, not only because he is forever maligned as “a CLEVER ILLITERATE PERSON” (413) and denied the right of public speech, but also in the sense that the imperfect “parsing” of his “history” (455) leads to his betrayal to the police by Thomas Curnow. His sense of injustice at having to wait to be appointed the class ink monitor until “everybody with an English name had taken a turn” (34) is emblematic of the relationship between his otherness and the denial of his right to self-representation: it gives rise an ambivalent and intense relationship with the schoolteacher Curnow, and has tragic resonance in his final stand at Glenrowan,

where he faces his oppressors as the Monitor. Concurrent with Ned's sense of otherness is his propensity to perceive Englishness as a discrete racial category, which is apparent when he returns from his bushranging apprenticeship with Harry Power to find "that natty Englishman Bill Frost" (72) "occupying ... [his] mother's bed" (122). Frost's Englishness, which is symbolised by his "ruddy face" (125) and the "hairy brown tweed coat" he insists on wearing "right through the worst of summer" (72), is a source of revulsion for Ned. It is also a marker of his superiority: in response to Ned's question as to what can be done to save the family's land from repossession by the government, Frost sneeringly replies, "Give it to the blacks ... no no the blacks don't want it give it to the Irish" (122).

Frost's taunt pinpoints the issue of Ned's transformable whiteness, which emerges in the context of the set of colonial discourses that designates the Catholic Irish as "Celtic Calibans" (McClintock 52). According to Anne McClintock, the nineteenth-century metaphor of the Family Tree of Man – a progeny of Social Darwinism – "offered a single genesis narrative for global history" (44) and figured "'degenerate' classes" such as the Irish, Jews, criminals and prostitutes "as racial deviants, atavistic throwbacks to a primitive moment in human prehistory, surviving ominously in the heart of the modern, imperial metropolis" (43). In the case of the Irish, the disturbing gap left by the absence of skin colour difference was filled by pseudo-scientific observations of the similarity between the Irish physiognomy and that of apes, as well as by the barbarism of their accents and domestic habits (53).

In Australia, nineteenth-century anti-Irish perceptions of "inferior racial type, backward religion, and the need for assimilation" reveal the interconnectedness of

discourses of Irish and Aboriginal otherness (Martin 32). In a discussion of Aboriginal appropriations of the Kelly myth, Deborah Bird Rose argues that Kelly appears in Yarralin Dreaming stories as a figure who “was opposed to what Captain Cook and his mob were doing to Australia,” and who came to be aligned “with the moral position of those who were being dispossessed” (183). Rose refers to one “remarkable” story about Kelly’s arrival in the region “long before any whitefellows” (179), and another in which he is “here in Australia at the very beginning of the world, [and indeed] instrumental in facilitating the division between earth and water that was part of the origins of life” (182). In “giv[ing] birth to an indigenous Ned Kelly,” the people of the Victoria River District, according to Rose, have “declared him to be not truly other, but truly us” (184), a gesture that leads her to the startling conclusion that “the dispossessed claim to have indeed understood. That they have accepted. And that they are offering us redemption” (185). Among the disturbing implications of Rose’s argument is that, in these stories, Kelly is somehow more black than the “blacks” themselves, which is echoed in Bill Frost’s spiteful suggestion that the Irish are even more degenerate than the Aboriginal peoples of North-Eastern Victoria.

The propensity for Ned’s black-whiteness to slide between degeneracy and authenticity, oppression and empowerment, demands to be read against the backdrop of the indigenisation narratives that characterise the literature of settler nations such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada. For Homi Bhabha, the crucial question to ask of discursive ambivalence is “[h]ow is desire disciplined, authority displaced?” (89); Australian settler postcolonialism, however, must also ask whose authority is desired and displaced. In *True History*, Ned’s racial ambivalence is itself double-edged, an

expression of the second-world experience of mediating between fear of and desire for indigenous authenticity. As Lawson suggests, “the menacing ‘not quite’ is here more dangerous,” with the settler subject

translating his (but rarely her) desire for the indigene and the land into a desire for native authenticity in a long series of narratives of psychic encounter and indigenisation. And in reacting to that subordinacy, incompleteness, that sign of “something less”, the settler mimics, appropriates, desires, the authority of the indigene. (12-13)

If, as Terry Goldie argues, indigenisation narratives enable the gaining of “soul and the potential to become of the land” by the “white character” (16), this is intensified in the racially ambiguous Irish body, which as a “mixed-race figure” enacts “a slippage between the white desire and the native right, white civilization and native elemental energy” (Lawson 14).

*True History* facilitates a double slippage – not just in the “mixed-race” Irish figure, but between this figure and the history of suffering it represents. Through Ned, Carey constructs a pseudo-biological distinction between those who have suffered the tortures of transportation to the Australian colony, and those who have inflicted that suffering:

they was Australians they knew full well the terror of the unyielding law the historic memory of UNFAIRNESS were in their blood and a man might be a bank clerk or an overseer he might never have been lagged for nothing but still he knew in his heart what it were to be forced to wear the white hood in prison he knew what it were to be lashed for looking a warder in the eye and

even a posh fellow like Moth had breathed that air so the knowledge of unfairness were deep in his bone and marrow. (404)

The genealogy of Australian victimhood is literalised in the relationship between Ned and his father, who is “destroyed in a country lockup” following his imprisonment for a crime that Ned himself committed, and whose death allows Ned to speak as the representative son of a suffering nation: “we cannot credit the tortures our parents suffered in Van Diemen’s Land – Port Macquarie – Toongabbie – Norfolk Island – Emu Plains ... [my father] were bulging with all the poisons of the Empire” (43). Ned’s reflection that his father’s death “finally granted everlasting title to the rich soil of Avenel” (47) is evocative of what Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra call “the bastard complex,” an “anxiety about origins” that haunts the settler subject’s sense of legitimate presence in the nation. Centuries of Irish suffering and dispossession in their own land, as symbolised by the terrifying figure of the Banshee that “come on board the cursed convict ships” when “our brave parents was ripped from Ireland like teeth from the mouth of their own history” (118), bolster the legitimacy of Ned’s claim to the Australian land. After his father’s burial, his mother “gathered her brood about her” to speak of a new mythology, not of “Cuchulainn and Dedriu and Mebd,” but of land ownership: “she said we would ... break wild horses and sell them and grow corn and wheat and raise fat sleek cattle and all the land beneath our feet would be our own to walk on from dawn to dusk ours and ours alone” (47).

This fantasy betrays an inherent contradiction at the core of Ned’s relationship with the Australian land. On the one hand, his deep connection with nature exudes precisely the kind of “native elemental energy” to which Lawson refers. This is evident

in the great number of metaphors drawn from the natural world that punctuate the text, such as “I were a rabbit in his snare” (159), and “these things are like the dark marks made in the rings of great trees locked forever in my daily self” (21). As a metaphysical space, the natural world absorbs and reflects Ned’s own psyche: “my mood [was] lower than the water in the King and all the land around me seemed set to share my feelings” (91-92); but as a geographical space, it represents a challenge that must be overcome. Paradoxically, he can only enter this natural space by exercising over it the mastery of knowledge. During his apprenticeship, Harry Power instructs him in the “secrets of the Strathbogie the Warbies & the Wombat Ranges,” and tells him, “If you know the country ... then you will be a wild colonial boy forever” (383). Harry, who makes accessible to Ned the “dangerous routes known only to thieves and wombats” (167), himself has “more boltholes than a family of foxes ... secret caves and mia mias and hollow trees throughout the North East of the colony of Victoria”: of these indigenous, natural spaces, Ned is “destined to sleep in all too many” (100).

The phrase “too many,” with its implications of excess, complicates a reading of Ned’s connection with the land as spiritual and innate. His positioning in the wild spaces of the Victorian colony is relative, defined only by its exclusion from the metropolitan centre of Melbourne – a city “crawling with policemen worse than flies” (5) – and the imperial authority it represents. His marginalisation is borne of a rebellion against the violation of his right to own the land on which he makes his home. The arrest of his brother Dan for the theft of a saddle puts an end to Ned’s final attempt to “[keep his] head in the ground like the proverbial ostrich” and engage in honest labour (251). Provoked beyond endurance by the abuses of the police and rich farmers,



he leaves his job at the Killawarra sawmill, and as he enters “unselected land” on horseback, declares that he will “teach [Dan’s] torturers they could not steal our stock and threaten our families without suffering the consequences” (255). From this point, his resistance to imperial authority is spatially experienced, in the sense that he envisions the police as “an army of invaders” in “[his] familiar hills” (350), and that “none of them can find their way around the Wombat Ranges” (99) or around the other wild spaces he inhabits. The phrase “too many” gestures to his sense of being pushed too far into these wild spaces of the colony, and his desire not to be in harmony with the Australian land, but to own and control it. This desire is codified in the language of war and military expansionism. For instance, he justifies “[spilling] human blood” by telling his daughter that he “were no more guilty than a soldier in a war” (26), and writes that, due to his supposed “army of friends,” the government loses control of “an entire slice of territory” (409). The desire to obtain and occupy territory is thus entwined with a language of violence that disrupts Ned’s harmonious communications with nature. In a similar way, the new Anglo-Australian mythology his mother imparts to the children at her knee is typified by the breaking and selling of wild animals, or in other words, the cultivation and commercialisation of the land’s natural resources, a central objective of British imperialism. The fantasy is thus shadowed by the “negative presence” of the indigene (Goldie 14), whose very existence renders ironic the idea that the invaded land can ever be “ours and ours alone.”

This irony is, according to Stephen Slemon, characteristic of the second-world text, in that it entangles “anti-colonial resistances” with “the colonialist machineries they seek to displace” (39): in Chambers’ words, it relies on the textual intimacies of

power and the power to oppose. Slemon goes on to argue that these “radically *compromised*” texts have “an enormous amount yet to tell to ‘theory’ about the nature of literary resistance,” as they have “consistently thematized, consistently worked *through*” this paradoxical entanglement (39). Ned’s doubled teleology of desire is worked through the discordant languages of primitivism and modernity, spirituality and politics, with the result that his claims to the Australian land are radically compromised. He sees his entry into “unselected land” as more than an expression of personal rage and rebellion; rather, it signifies a collective sub-cultural consciousness of Irish persecution and an organised resistance to imperial power. He writes proudly that “in the middle of that wilderness we cleared the flats and planted crops,” imagining his men to be building “one of them Secondary Industries the government is so keen about,” and “a world where we would be left alone.” For Ned, echoing Patrick White’s *Voss* (1957), these are “our achievements in the wilderness” (260), and it is precisely the tension between the “achievements” of modernity and imperialism and the primitive legitimacy of “wilderness” that characterises the settler subject’s double displacement.

Ned’s wilderness state generates a flux of indigenous authenticity and imperial authority, dispossession and counter-dispossession. Following his resignation from the sawmill, he enjoys the thrill of “mov[ing] invisibly” across the property of the hated Magistrate McBean, imagining himself to be “a serpent inside his arteries a plague rat in his bowels” (255). Cloaked by nature, he not only resists subjection to colonial surveillance, but appropriates the relationship between looking and possessing for the purposes of asserting his own authentic primitivism: “I lived on their back door more

than once sitting on my horse to watch McBean eat tea & when his dogs was going wild he could do no more than stare out into the wild colonial dark. He did not own that country he never could" (259). Here, the wild and dark colonial body enacts its own inverted form of colonial surveillance in order to dispossess the imperialists of the land they have invaded.

The contradictions of this counter-dispossession are rendered more explicit later in the text. Following the murders at Stringybark Creek and the imprisonment of his mother, Ned and his gang creep home to Eleven Mile Creek "like blackfellows in the night." Again, darkness shields Ned from imperial authority – this time it is the nearby encampment of police "sworn by secret oath to avenge their dead" – and again, he is afforded visual power: "There were a ¼ moon some fast moving cloud permitted sufficient light to show the familiar bosom shape of Bald Hills" (347). This passage is notable in that it contains two sources of threatening otherness, whose absent-presence resonates not only in the mimicry of "like," but in the erotic familiarity of the surrounding hills.

As Ned approaches the family home, an act of voyeurism gives rise to an experience of the uncanny. Peering through the windows of the house, he sees a female form moving back and forth between "dark shadow" and "ghostly yellow light," a troubling spectacle that causes the hair on the back of his neck to bristle. From a saucepan in the woman's hand rises a "cloud of dense yellow smoke," through which Ned can see "that crow black hair that white skin" he recognises as his mother's. With a "bolt of joy" he calls her name aloud, but as she turns to face him he realises with a "shock" that the woman is Mary Hearn (347-48). Ned's "confusion" (347) of his lover

for his mother is a source of uneasy pleasure. This has already emerged during his first sexual encounters with Mary, in which he sucks milk from her breasts, and is aroused by her similarity to his mother: “I never saw the like of her before she were so wonderfully familiar ... [she brushed my shirt] against her cheek the way I seen my mother touch a red rose to her face” (274). This is consonant with a broader Oedipal theme, which is apparent throughout the narrative with varying degrees of blatancy: in Ned’s childhood memory of seeing “the dark” of his mother’s vagina (32) and in Dan’s observation that she is his “donah” (249), but most notably in his sense of responsibility for his father’s death (“it were my job to replace the father as it were my fault we didnt have him anymore” [49]).

Following the father’s burial, the Kelly family moves into its selection at Eleven Mile Creek. It is a pivotal moment in the development of Ned’s masculine identity; he leaves behind his “children’s chores” (63) and takes control of the family’s land and stock, literally stepping into his father’s “mighty boots” and finding that they fit him well (64). Just “2 hr.” after their arrival at the property, he has “felled a mighty gum tree,” and is satisfied that his family has “witnessed [his] new strength and [knew he] could be the man” (63). Unlike his father, who is accused of “cowardice” (22) because he fails to take possession of the “virgin acres” made available by the Duffy Land Act of 1862 (23), Ned is anxious to display his masculine dominance. However, that Ned “could be” the man suggests that such dominance is performative, tenuous and contingent. Immediately following this, his sister Annie frets that they “need a cove” to marry their mother and “save” them (63), and Ned’s response – “Didnt you see how many trees I dropped?” (64) – constructs his masculine authority as a

spectacle that must be witnessed and validated by its familial subjects. Concurrently, it reveals the triangulated structure of desire at its core: for Ned, to “be the man” is to express his dominant sexuality through the violent containment of the natural world.

Lawson states that settler societies “are suspended between ‘mother’ and ‘other’, simultaneously colonized and colonizing” (12). Implicit in Lawson’s statement is the notion that in colonial narratives race is always shadowed by gender. Ned’s “virgin acres” fantasy makes explicit the formative relationship between patriarchal and imperial power, for within patriarchal narratives “to be virgin is to be empty of desire and void of sexual agency, passively awaiting the thrusting, male insemination of history, language and reason,” and within colonial narratives, “if the land is virgin, colonized peoples cannot claim aboriginal territorial rights” (McClintock 30). A more complicated picture emerges in a nation like Australia, where the “aboriginal” is capitalised and amplified, subject to competing claims for its political, commercial and spiritual value. In response, *True History* facilitates a more subversive sexual landscape in which neither mother nor land is virginal.

For Ned, “the man” is a perpetually open-ended construct in the sense that one of its sites of desire – the mother’s body – is unavailable to him. The first of her many “new husbands” (71) arrives soon after the death of his father, and from this point he becomes locked in a battle for masculine dominance that plays out in a seemingly endless cycle of possession and counter-possession of the woman’s body and the land it represents. He is bitterly resentful of the “coves who come trotting along the heat hazed track to see the widow” (71), but the language he uses to describe their abhorrent sexual aggression is the same language that characterises his own spatialised

sexuality. He writes with disgust of the constant flow of suitors, who, like himself, perform their sexual dominance through repetitive, almost compulsive, rituals of violence against the land:

Now [Alex Gunn] were set to perform the wonder of dropping the tree...

That night he slept on the table that is very close by my mother's bed. He was up twice in the night and each time I were there to fetch him the lantern.

Next day [he] departed and Harry Power returned it were like an adjectival railway station...

The next day I dropped 3 very big river gums without no assistance and also shot 4 cockatoos which I plucked and gutted...

The next time Harry come back he presented my mother with a freshly slaughtered ewe he had shot it in the head and up the backside ... He stayed the night and left early.

By design or accident Alex Gunn returned almost immediately afterwards. (74-75)

As "railway station," the mother is passively receptive of her suitor's train-like sexual dominance. More significantly, these scenes betray a connection between landscape and femininity that has a specific genealogy in Australian nationalist discourse. Kay Schaffer identifies the feminised landscape as a formative trope of Australian national identity, arguing that in nationalist narratives "the land as an object virtually always is represented as feminine," a metaphor that reproduces the idea that "man/masculinity is the universal norm for culture ... and woman/femininity is the other, the adjunct, an object of desire for man" (14). As Schaffer suggests, the

gendered culture-nature binary is a structuring principle of Western discourse (82), and it thus implicates Carey's text in the ideology of imperialism. However, it is also characteristic of Australian anti-colonial resistance narratives, in which "native sons confront the British parent culture to determine who will have authority, power and presence in the land" (21). McClintock's point that "the feminizing of the land is both a *poetics* of ambivalence and a *politics* of violence" (28) is particularly pertinent to *True History*: the mother simultaneously embodies the British motherland of cultural authority, the Australian motherland of native authenticity, the Irish motherland of diasporic displacement, and the passive, natural space on which masculine identities are enacted. In Carey's text, however, the motherland metaphor does more than mirror second-world subjectivity: it confounds and disrupts its ideological trajectory. If the gendered discourses of colonialism and nationalism, and the settler narratives that emerge in the spaces between them, are characterised by the desire for possession, *True History* exploits this desire for the purposes of initiating some alternative modes of national belonging.

This project begins in the text at the moment of homecoming. The scene of Ned's uncanny experience at the window of his mother's kitchen is framed with the juxtaposition of disparate qualities – shadow and light, white and black, mother and lover, shock and joy – which simultaneously generates a sense of familiarity and estrangement. That such estrangement is specifically domestic is made clear by the image of the saucepan in the woman's hand – a symbol of homely comfort is transformed into a "ghostly" spectre by the "cloud of dense yellow smoke" that arises from it (347). The experience of being alienated from an intimately familiar space is

evocative of what Freud calls “the uncanny”: the disturbing simultaneity of home and unhome, familiar and strange. Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs borrow the term from Freud to theorise the condition of postcolonial Australia: “In this moment of decolonisation, what is ‘ours’ is also potentially, or even always already, ‘theirs’: the one is becoming the other, the familiar is becoming strange” (23). In the climate of what they call “the amplification of the sacred” (45), new modes of possession are created:

In an uncanny Australia, one’s place is always already another’s place and the issue of possession is never complete, never entirely settled ... one is always (dis)possessed, in the sense that neither possession nor dispossession is a fully recognisable category. (138)

*True History*’s cyclic patterns of exile and return position Ned in the interstices of place and displacement, the profoundly unsettled site of (dis)possession. His first and most painful exile is instigated by his mother, who sells him as an apprentice to Harry Power and fills his position in the family with her lover Bill Frost. Ned is “poleaxed” by this betrayal (91), and consumed with hatred for Frost, who has “thrown [him] off [his] own land” (100) and to whom he has therefore “los[t] [his] mother” (91). However, when he finally returns to the home he has “dreamed of so many lonely nights,” “shock” (119) and estrangement are again his dominant emotions. The landscape and his mother’s body are rendered foreign, invaded and “improve[d]” by an alien masculine presence:

[the house] appeared v. small its bark roof swaybacked ... the creek [was] raging there were a low grey cloud and a threatening cold wind off the



mountains. I witnessed a great kind of desolation ... My mother followed walking with her left hand rested against her stomach the way a woman does when another heart is beating in her womb. This were Bill Frost's improvement nothing else. (119-20)

A very similar scene of homecoming later in the text also exploits the violent implications of sexual and imperial "improvement." This time Ned returns from a year in Beechworth Prison to find his home "altered beyond hope": the creek has "changed its course," the "big red gum" is "20 ft. taller," and there is "a new holding yard" (225). The unfamiliarity of the landscape is again complimented by the insemination of the mother's body, as symbolised by the newborn in her arms – this time fathered by American horse thief George King. The scene recurs twice more, and in both Ned finds his motherland degenerating: "my mother's hands was large and dried like roots dug from the hard plains of Greta" (257); "she were with child again she were too old for this having lost 4 teeth while pregnant with John King now her cheeks was cleaving to her gums" (293).

In these scenes, the crux of Ned's "sad[ness]" (227), "disgust" (225), and "rage" (229) is that he is unable to wrest himself from his stranglehold of desire and affect a complete dispossession of his mother and land. Suitably, he expresses his connection to both in a metaphor of nature, imagining that he and his mother are "grown together like 2 branches of an old wisteria" (257). The pain of (dis)possession is palpable in his lament: "All my life all I wanted were a home but I come back ... to find the land I had laboured on become a stranger's territory" (229). The notion of the postcolonial national home as a "stranger's territory" is deeply unsettling and

productively transgressive, a beginning point at which “the conventional colonial distinctions between self and other, here and there, mine and yours” dissolve into “a condition of unboundedness” (Gelder and Jacobs 138). In the terms of narrative opposition, Ned’s thwarted desire for colonial and sexual possession represents the seduction of (settler) power in favour of those of (postcolonial) opposition. As “*the discourse of power made readable*” (Chambers 18), *True History*’s motherland trope must therefore, “by definition, produce some change in its [reader]” (13).

As a readable colonial discourse, the motherland is necessarily steeped in patriarchal power. Schaffer argues that in Australian national narratives, women seldom appear in “their own right. They appear as daughters, lovers, wives and mothers in relationships to men. That is, they are (always) already spoken for” (63). In *True History*, the mother is only ever a landscape of identity, a passive space on which male battles are waged. However, Schaffer’s assertion is also suggestive of the already-spoken-for daughter to whom Ned’s narrative is addressed, and who draws attention to the gendered and racial absences of its national family drama.

### Chapter 3

#### **“Suitable for the Occasion”: Theatre and History**

In the introduction to Parcel 11, the anonymous editor notes that “[i]n both tone and handwriting” the pages “attest to the outlaw’s growing anger that he should be denied a national audience” (407). This detached observation is shadowed by the suggestion of suffering, of a clamped fist and words scored in anger on a page, and it therefore revisits the text’s concern with the pain of historical silence. The reference to the “national audience” also draws attention to the theatrical vocabulary that emerges towards the end of the narrative, and that in this case has seeped into its editorial bracketing. Parcel 11 exemplifies Ned’s tendency to codify his “growing anger” and deviant agency in a diffuse theatrical metaphor. It charts the final stages of his self-perpetuated apotheosis from abused victim to enraged resistance fighter, opening with the boastful claim that the Victorian Government “lacked the brains” to arrest him (409) and concluding with the description of himself as “the terror” of this government “being brung to life in the cauldron of the night” (430). In between these points he tells the reader: “We cd. look down from the Warby Ranges and see the plumes of dust rising off the plains and know the police was actors in a drama writ by me” (411). The pleasure of this spatial fantasy emerges in the association between reclaiming territory and reclaiming representation. The connection has already been established early in the parcel with Ned’s claim that malicious media reports of “the Mansfield Murderer” and his squint-eyed, hooked-nosed gang “could not diminish the fact the government had lost control of an entire slice of territory” (409). Specifically, Ned’s fantasy gratifies

his desire to overwrite the subjectivity of the police – as well as other “important actors in the colony” (378) – with his historical counter-plot. At the same time, the parcel’s editorial introduction suggests that his own subjectivity emerges in spectatorship – that he can only be “brung to life” by the “national audience” of his textual self-construction. The theatrical metaphor continues throughout the remainder of the book, as does its propensity to both express and contain Ned’s subversive agenda.

Concurrent to these explicit discursive signposts is the history’s performative content, which is most spectacularly manifest in the bodies of the cross-dressing Irish men in blackface. This is complimented and complicated by a relentless deference to the visual: Ned’s story is spatially enacted for the reader’s pleasure, alternating between daring robberies, comical skits, sexual encounters and horse-back stunts that dramatise his masculinity and resistance to authority. The upshot of this deployment of theatre as textual discourse and narrative practice – and the entanglement of both with questions of historical agency – is that the reader is compelled to consider the ideological function of theatre and spectatorship in *True History*, as well as in other kinds of colonial and postcolonial histories.

The text offers a kind of cryptic answer to its own questions in the form of “two roughly excised pages of Henry V” attached by “rusty pins” (447) to the final pages of Parcel 13. The parcel is primarily concerned with the events at Jones’ hotel on the evening before the siege at Glenrowan, and in particular the relationship between Ned and his captive Thomas Curnow. The schoolteacher is “fascinated” with Ned’s history (453), staring at the manuscripts on his desk as he would “a dog standing on his

hind legs and talking” (454) and insisting that Ned allows him to read them. Ned is similarly interested in Curnow’s “thick book” of Shakespeare plays, but when he asks if the play he is reading is “any good” the patronising response makes him feel like “an oaf in muddy boots tracking across some oriental rug” (453).

The pathos of this image belies its embedded irony: in juxtaposing a Shakespearean play with “some oriental rug,” Ned unwittingly evokes the role of English literature, and particularly Shakespeare, in the civilising mission of the British Empire. According to Gauri Viswanathan, the discipline of English literature was first developed in the classrooms of colonial India, where it was used to produce a generation of Indians who “thought and behaved” like Europeans “instead of merely speaking like [them]” (91); a class, in the words of Salman Rushdie’s Vasco Miranda, of “Bleddy Macaulay’s minutemen” (165). Viswanathan argues that the English literary canon was devised in accordance with its role in “moral and intellectual suasion,” and its content re-interpreted for the needs of consolidating the colonisers’ cultural power (2). While the copy of *Henry V* acts as a talisman of imperial hegemony, its owner, a schoolteacher, recalls Ned’s internalisation of racial inferiority – not as “oriental,” but as Catholic Irish – and specifically embodies “that prim & superior fellow [his] mother must stand before in her threadbare dress [and] beg to have [him] educated” (453). Curnow’s supercilious praise for Ned’s “bracing & engaging” history (455) holds the promise of absolution for a lifetime of oppression, a chance for Ned to symbolically address those by whom he has been silenced. His shame at his history’s “rough[ness]” and imperfect “parsing” (455), together with the reader’s awareness of Curnow’s impending betrayal, renders this moment both tragic and suspenseful.

The scene that follows subtly evokes what Viswanathan calls the “supreme paradox of British power” (165): that the education of colonial subjects brought about the “moral autonomy, self-sufficiency, and unencumbered will” by which the British Raj was ultimately displaced (143). In this scene, Shakespeare’s *Henry V* – precisely the kind of text deployed to perform the ideological work of imperialism – is ironically reinterpreted in the name of Irish-Australian independence. On the one hand, Curnow’s recital of the famous St Crispin’s Day speech for the entertainment of his fellow hostages performs a crucial narrative function: Ned is so flattered that “a man of learning might compare us to a King” (459) that he decides to trust Curnow and allow him to leave the hotel with the manuscripts. However, when Curnow describes the speech as “a little something suitable for the occasion” (458) his words refer not only to the narrative occasion of battle but to the enunciative occasion of the Shakespearean intertext. The recital constructs a nexus of generic self-reference, activating not just a conversation between texts and canons but between competing forms of historical representation.

The comparison between Henry V and Ned Kelly functions on one level as a literary in-joke between the reader and the schoolteacher at the expense of his enthralled but largely illiterate audience. *Henry V* dramatises the expansionist king’s first French campaign, culminating in England’s astonishing victory at the Battle of Agincourt on 25 October 1415 (Saint Crispin’s Day) in northern France. Until recently, the battle has been feted as one of the greatest victories in English military history, and on one level *Henry V* is a “celebration of England’s national hero at a momentous period in the country’s history” (Ludowyk 159). An historical battle is ostensibly

appropriated by the nascent British nationalism of Shakespeare's contemporary moment, a pattern that is distortedly reiterated at the siege of Glenrowan. The specific nature of this nationalist appropriation reveals a richer and more pernicious irony: in the final act of *Henry V* the Chorus compares the king's triumphant return to "the General of our gracious Empress ... from Ireland coming" (Prologue, 29-31). As Christopher Ivic explains, Shakespeareans have long been aware of the play's concern with the Nine Years' War raging in Ireland at the time of its conception (86). In a scene that anxiously repeats Henry's divine and political right to the French throne, the King's noblemen worry about the threat of their "giddy [Celtic] neighbours" (1.2.145), and about leaving an "unguarded nest" (1.2.170) exposed to England's "pilfering borders" (1.2.142). When, in Carey's text, Curnow's voice rings out with the rhetoric of English political and military dominance and the uncomprehending crowd turns "reverently" to Ned's "armour'd" Irish-Australian men (459), the ironic "suitab[ility]" (458) of his speech is clear.

However, the ironic disjunction between the St Crispin's Day speech and its occasion in *True History* is consonant with the ironic disjunctions already apparent in the speech itself. Henry bolsters his battle's historical significance in the name of two French saints, Crispin and Crispianus; this seemingly minor quirk – which Curnow literally recites on the eve of battle between a British and a "true Australian" army (459) – prompts a crucial shift in focus to the similarities between Shakespeare's and Carey's texts. The speech takes place in both texts at the intersection of myth, history and literature: Henry will be remembered from "this day to the ending of the world" (4.3.58), and, following Curnow's recital, Ned's manuscript will be "abruptly

terminated” (447) by an omniscient narrative voice. Like Ned, the fictional Henry V doubles back on his own historicity, using the distorted memories of “[o]ld men” from a future time to engender a mythological selfhood: “he’ll remember, with advantages / What feats he did that day. Then shall our names ... Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered” (4.3.49-55). More importantly, each text is consumed with a fear of illegitimacy that is revealed through self-legitimizing rhetoric, and each attempts to displace a war between irreconcilable parts of the national self onto a war with a foreign other. In light of this, the occasion of the canonical intertext is paradigmatic for reading its host narrative’s complex imbrication of history and theatre.

The recital is a moment of historiographic metatheatre: an historical play at the centre of a theatrical history, an internal dioramic replica of a recurring structural motif. As a momentary pause before an historical and textual death, the recital reflects on *True History*’s generic ambivalence. This ambivalence is itself entwined with the trope of theatre: as literature, *True History* self-consciously replicates what Elleke Boehmer calls the “national family drama” of nationalist narratives; as history, it mimics the imperial historian’s compulsion to represent the past as a “theatrical performance” (Carter xiv). The occasion of *Henry V* draws into focus these theatrical tropes, and, concurrently, the readers’ sense of their own spectatorship; embedded within Carey’s text, *Henry V*’s “metadramatic self-consciousness” (Rackin 71) compels the “spectator” to read against the host narrative’s hegemonic nationalist stagings. Ultimately, Curnow’s is less a recital of a canonical intertext than of the power structures of which the nation is comprised, and that the spectator of both Shakespeare’s and Carey’s texts is invited to read, necessarily, as oppositional.



Theatrical history and the national drama find a common source of ideological legitimacy in the metaphorical family of colonial and postcolonial discourses.

McClintock argues that the relationship between history and spectatorship emerged in the nineteenth-century metaphor of the family Tree of Man, a visual paradigm that “display[ed] evolutionary progress as a measurable spectacle” (37) and “provided scientific racism with a *gendered* image for popularizing and disseminating the idea of *racial* progress” (39). Boehmer captures the metaphor’s continuing significance for postcolonial nationalisms in an appropriate image: “As in the cross-section of a tree trunk that is nowhere unmarked by its grain – by that pattern expressing its history – so, too, is the nation informed throughout by its gendered history” (3). In a similar way in which the family Tree of Man presents evolutionary time as “a *time without women*” (McClintock 39), the trope of the national family drama, according to Boehmer, renders women invisible as “equal participant[s] in the *action* of the drama” (28). While the male “author and subject” is “a part of the national community or contiguous with it” (29), the mother figure acts “as his mentor, fetish or talisman” (91), and “the female child is a – if not *the* – non-subject” (106) within the imagined community.

For settler nationalism, these gendered absences are inherently racial. In postcolonial Australia, the metaphorical family of colonial discourse – the family Tree of Man – inscribes a racial hierarchy of evolutionary progress that arms the Aborigine with dangerous legitimacy. The family’s ideological potency derives from the image of the mother and its attendant connotations of birth, origins, home and roots (Boehmer 27); for the settler society to use the “so-called organic social and cultural” (31)

structure of the family as a “*formative medium*” of its nationhood (30), it must also subsume and efface indigenous power. According to Paul Carter, theatrical history responds to the need to legitimate white Australian beginnings – to fit them out with “new paternities” (xvi) – by representing the Australian landscape as “a stage where history occurred, history a theatrical performance.” Carter adds: “It is not the historian who stages events, weaving them together to form a plot, but History itself” (xiv). In this kind of history, the threat represented by the indigene to the national family’s legitimacy is rhetorically neutralised, and the past is “settled even more effectively than the country” (xx).

*True History* self-consciously mimics these theatrical tropes. Firstly, it reveals unmistakable parallels with Boehmer’s description of the national family drama: “It may be of course ... that a national son grows into the role of father of the nation across the course of a narrative detailing his exploits, though he will continue to honour the nation or land as his mother” (28). The scene of Ned’s daughter’s birth overtly signposts the performative nature and nationalist significance of his transition from son to father. The scene revolves around absent-present women: immediately prior, Ned laments that he is unable to break his mother from jail, and that “[he] knew [his daughter] must be arrived” despite the fact that there was “still no word” from Mary (434). At this point he has “abandoned the letter to the government,” and tells his daughter that he “would of give up this very history too” if not for his fear that if he stopped writing she “would vanish and be swallowed by the maw.” This anxious mistrust of Mary’s voracious maternity is accentuated by his claim that he “wrote to get [his daughter] born” (434). Here, he reveals a familiar slippage between artistic

creation and patriarchal procreation, constructing himself as the nation's "[author] of meaning," the mother as a threatening procreative vessel, and the disembodied female child as little more than a literary trope within a grand narrative of nationalist and imperialist "selving" (Boehmer 92).

This narrative is "a drama" both "writ" and performed by Ned (411), as demonstrated by his reaction to the long-awaited telegram announcing the birth: "I roared like a bull ... [and galloped] in a circle round the paddock then a figure 8 I stood astride the mare one legged my pistols in my hands" (435). He uses poetical, melodramatic language to direct his own performance and to enrich its symbolic meaning. News of the birth, for instance, "spread[s] like yellow gorse across the hills" (435), and the organic national community "rise[s] from the earth like winter oats" to claim his genealogical regeneration for itself: "we was them and they was us and we had showed the world what convict blood could do" (436). As he stands beneath "the dazzling Milky Way" to proclaim his "colonial stratagem" (436), "DAM AND FILLY" (435) are necessarily displaced from his republicanist stage.

In this moment, dramatic nationalism and theatrical history intersect. The birth of the daughter concurrently gives birth to a national father, through whom white Australia's racial purity and indigenous legitimacy can germinate: "We proved there were no taint we was of true bone blood and beauty born" (436). His declaration of anti-imperial war is presented as inevitable and fated, as "a historical repetition, a further enactment of a universal theme" (Carter xv): "The words must be said and say them I did ... I never planned my speech or understood its consequences ... [but I] spoke the truth" (436-47). This appeal to the logic of cause and effect constructs

Australian nationalism as the organic emergence of order from chaos. As part of a “mythic lineage of heroes,” Ned validates the notion that “historical individuals are actors, fulfilling a higher destiny” (xvii): just prior to the birth scene, he speculates grandly that the printing of his “58 pages to the government” (417) in the *Jerilderie Gazette* will “elevate” its editor “to a higher calling” (423). This is consonant with other parts of the text, most notably when he is passively propelled by his mother and Harry Power into his criminal destiny. During his unwilling apprenticeship to Power, a jarring oscillation between first and third person narration splits his historical agency – “what was I to do?” (91) – from his character role in a pre-determined script: “[the boy shot] the possum [and] thus he sealed his fate” (85); “The boy never knew he were being taught the path of his life” (88). He evokes the poetics of the archetype – “We was Past & Future we was Innocence & Age” (97) – to further bolster the symbolic meaning of his experience. In other moments he textualises himself as History’s grand puppeteer:

The Commissioner thought he were the servant of Her Majesty the Queen  
but he were my puppet on a string he ordered the Special Train as I desired  
he summoned the black trackers and called for Hare & Nicholson who  
thought themselves famous as the capturers of Harry Power they never  
imagined they would be captives in a drama devised by me. (451)

According to Carter, Aborigines must “loiter on the edge of our historical clearing, throwing spears or performing corroborees with equal alacrity” so that they can be “carried away as cultural treasure by the victors” (327). Aborigines certainly loiter on the edges of *True History*, locked within its theatrical ambit. Their discursive

omnipresence is occasionally embodied in minor, largely silent cameo roles, which rehearse familiar colonial discourses: “The roof were on fire and the hut surrounded by shouting savages ... [Red] begun to say his prayers while the blacks thrust their spears through the gaps” (17). Similarly, the “black trackers” (451) aiding the police are “murderous demons” (433), captives not only in Ned’s drama but in the discourse of savagery. However, the fact that Warragul’s mob is “made of the remnants of different tribes” (16) layers its savagery with a history of genocide and dispossession. In itself, this discursive instability is unremarkable, for it is characteristic of the text in general; but in this context, it points to Ned’s inability to contain his textual creations within the theatrical metaphor.

While the narrative function of *True History*’s theatrical trope is to fix the place of the feminine and the indigenous signifier, its textual function is to reorientate the national community towards its “pilfering” gendered and racial borders. According to Alison Thorne, Shakespeare’s second tetralogy, of which *Henry V* is a part, charts a shift in the political milieu of the time: from a feudal, hierarchically organised and divinely-sanctioned monarchy, to one that “acknowledges the need for popular legitimation” (167). Like the postcolonial settler nation, which is characterised by diffuse social power and an externally contingent legitimacy, the late-Elizabethan monarchy was “acutely mindful of the necessity of compensating for the loss of sanctified authority” (167). In late twentieth-century Australia, renegotiations of land and power invest the indigenous “fringe” (Gelder and Jacobs 56) with a profound significance, and the ability to “reach right across Australia: all over the place” (16). The place of the “monstrous feminine” (Schaffer 62) reveals itself as similarly

unbounded, physically absent but compulsively projected onto a sexualised landscape as the “otherness at [the] borders against which identity is measured” (21). Femininity and Aboriginality are relocated to the centre of the national community, which needs the former to provide “its legitimating symbols, its self-validating show” (Boehmer 30), and the latter to provide “the means of making [it] reconcilable with itself” (Gelder and Jacobs 1).

At first glance, Shakespeare’s play reads like “state propaganda” (Dollimore and Sinfield 211). Critics such as Richard Helgerson have tended to assume that the play is complicit with the pro-monarchical rhetoric of the Chorus, which paints a picture of a nation ablaze with love and loyalty for the imperial “star of England” (Epilogue, 6). According to Phillip Edwards, historical re-enactments of the past played a crucial part in engendering nationalist unity towards the end of the Elizabethan era, providing “a ‘myth of origin’ for the emerging nation” (68). In this context, *Henry V* reveals uncanny parallels with *True History*: as an historical novel, its generic “*stability*” (Gelder and Salzman 140) seeks to counterbalance the “*instability*” (141) of colonial history, offering an uncannily familiar, anti-British “myth of origin” of its own. Conversely, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield and have argued that *Henry V*’s discursive ambivalence exposes the fault lines inherent in “the fantasy of establishing ideology unity in the sole figure of the monarch” (235). According to the logic of this cultural materialist interpretation, the play’s occasion in *True History* might signal an unconscious ideological ambivalence in the latter, about the historical moment of colonial Australia as well as its ideological representation in postcolonial narrative. The Archbishop of Canterbury’s likening of the organic

national community to “the honey-bees” – “Creatures that by a rule in nature teach / The act of order to a peopled kingdom” (1.2.186-89) – seems to resonate with Ned’s repeated use of natural metaphors to assert his indigenous legitimacy. In the scene of his daughter’s birth, Ned’s “own people” rise “from the earth like winter oats” (436); like the noblemen of *Henry V*, who almost simultaneously celebrate England’s harmonious national “music” (1.2.183) and worry about its “pilfering borders” (1.2.142), Ned unconsciously draws attention to the racial exclusivity of the national community’s “own people” (436).

According to these critical approaches, *Henry V* – and by implication, *True History* – operates, with varying degrees of effectiveness, as authoritarian narrative. Like authoritarian literature, which “encourage[s] maximum identification with the (textually produced) narratee” (Chambers 13), historical theatre derives its power from its ability to “make audiences experience in themselves the full immediacy of the emotions enacted on stage” (Thorne 170). In her assessment of Thomas Nashe’s contemporary account of the Elizabethan chronical play, Thorne argues that “the unmatched reality effects made possible by the theatrical medium” rendered it “a far more effective instrument for inculcating patriotic values than ‘worme-eaten bookes’ of chronicals” (170). The traditional purpose of the historical play is to generate an “illusion of presence” so powerful as to erase the distinction between text and reality, past and present (170).

However, each text reveals a disharmony between the aggrandising rhetoric of its actors, and what is actually performed in “on stage” itself. In *Henry V*’s opening scene, for instance, the Archbishop of Canterbury praises the monarch’s

transformation from the rebellious Prince Hal in *Henry IV* to a king so “full of grace and fair regard” (1.1.23): “The breath no sooner left his father’s body / But that his wildness, mortified in him / Seemed to die too” (1.1.26-28). Prince Hal’s “Hydra-headed willfullness” (1.1.36) nevertheless returns to haunt the “Christian King” (1.2.241), most strikingly at the gates of Harfleur, where he articulates a horrific fantasy of colonial rape: “in a moment look to see / The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand / Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters ... [and] Your naked infants spitted upon spikes” (3.3.113-18). The Chorus’ “homage sweet” reveals itself, in this light, as “poisoned flattery” (4.1.238-39). As Norman Rabkin argues, the play is “a rabbit-duck” (35); it “points in two opposite directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the opposed interpretations it requires of us” (34). The St Crispin’s Day speech draws into focus *True History*’s own rabbit-duck dynamic, or, in Chambers’ terms, the relationship between its narrative and textual functions. Here, Rabkin’s either/or of the gestaltian paradigm becomes to the both/and of oppositional literature.

On the one hand, Carey’s text uses spectacular reality effects to transmute itself from a “worme-eaten booke” into a Carter-esque theatrical history, but it is precisely because of these reality effects that his readers are forced to question their own subjectivity as spectators. Greg Denning argues that the task of historians is to present the past as radically mediated, to both “perform” and “perform in” their narratives (116). According to Denning, when everyday experience is performed on stage, it is transformed by being shaped and selected for interpretation, to the extent that it redresses rather than replicates reality; the historian’s self-consciously theatrical rendering of the past, he argues, “will do the same” (127). Read in the context of



Denning's dictum – "We need to perform our texts. We need to perform in our texts" (116) – *True History* exemplifies the (pseudo-)historian's willingness to exploit the theatrical possibilities of the past. The objective is to "represent what is actually being displayed and audienced in all the theatres of living, but especially in the theatres of power" (118). Both *Henry V* and *True History* invite the reader-spectator to scrutinise the interpolative techniques to which they are subjected. In the former, the Chorus draws attention to the paradoxes of historical representation, to the "unworth[iness]" of "this wooden O" to "bring forth" the "vast fields of France," and to the impossibility of reproducing "the very casques / That did affright the air at Agincourt" (Prologue, 10-14). The Chorus makes explicit the fact that the play depends on the audience's readerly activity of interpretation, on their willingness to "Work, work [its] thoughts" and "follow / These culled and choice-drawn cavaliers to France" (Prologue, 3.23-25). *True History*'s editorial paratext operates to similar effect, continually reminding the reader of the theatrical effects to which they, as "national audience," are subjected. Unlike Carter's "diorama history" (xx), which divorces historical facts from their temporal and spatial context, Denning's brand of theatrical history ceaselessly foregrounds the fact that all narrations, literary and historical, "are *to* somebody as well as *of* something" (126).

Denning's assertion pinpoints the crucial function of the daughter in *True History*'s manoeuvrings within and against its own theatres of power. Ned tells her that "[he] wrote to get [her] born" (434): in claiming exclusive ownership of his textually-engendered progeny, Ned draws into focus the male "competition with woman as maker" (255) that Gayatri Spivak locates at the centre of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

(1818). Spivak's influential reading of Shelley's novel focuses on the role of Margaret Saville, the absent sister to whom the protagonist's letters are addressed. This "framing woman," like Ned's daughter, is "neither tangential" to the narrative, "nor encircled, nor yet encircling":

Margaret Saville does not respond to close the text as frame. The frame is thus simultaneously not a frame, and the monster can step "beyond the text" and be "lost in darkness." Within the allegory of our reading, the place of both the English lady and the unnamable monster are left open by this great flawed text. (Spivak 259)

On the one hand, Ned's daughter, unnamable in her absence, exists beyond his narrative framework, which he acknowledges in his attempt to circumscribe her unknowable qualities: "your dark eyes [will] widen..." (5); "I cannot guess how old you are" (270). The frame of Ned's narrative is in this sense not a frame, because the daughter can step beyond her captivity in his patriarchal nationalist discourse. However, Ned also tells her that he "wrote so [she] wd. read [his] words" (434), and hence acknowledges that his paternity, allegorical and actual, is contingent on her reading, and being read. The great flaw of oppositional literature is its ongoing readability, its inability and unwillingness to fix its own discursive place, a phenomenon that Chambers elucidates in a suggestive metaphor:

my own metaphor, derived from the thematics of voyeurism and eavesdropping, has been that of "staging" – the narrative act (narrator-narratee in relationship) is said to be readable because staged textually. There is, in short, a prevailing sense of a distinction to be made, within a text,

between the mode of communication it *represents* and the mode of communication it *enacts*. (35)

As the community celebrates Ned's paternity, spectatorship is triply inscribed, encompassing the internal narrative spectator ("all the boys stared"), the framing woman to whom the narrative is addressed ("it were you. You was born") (435) and the reader who watches the daughter watching her father, eavesdropping on their one-sided conversation. The eavesdropper is pulled into and ejected from an empathetic reading position with the framing woman, compelled to interpret Ned's communicational act.

As *True History*'s actual and theoretical narrator, Ned depends for oppositional survival on the satisfaction of the narratee's desires: appropriately, the fitting out of Australian history with new and legitimate paternities. It is for this reason that the truthfulness of his testimony is so anxiously asserted at its outset. "This history," he writes to his daughter, "is for you and will contain no single lie" (5). However, the next sentence – "God willing I shall live to see you read these words" – acknowledges that his corporeal death gives rise to his narrative immortality, in the sense that his words are endlessly interpretable by the external reader who "sees [her] read" them, and knows that they "speak false" (5). Like the daughter herself, who is forced against her will to look "inside [her] parents' [bedroom] door" at her father gazing upon her mother's naked body (270), the reader, in turn, is compelled to gaze upon the narrative intercourse of father and daughter – to watch her "dark eyes widen and [her] jaw drop" (5) as he exploits her desire for his own oppositional purposes.

Ned learns of his unborn daughter's existence in the same scene in which he begins "the proper story of her da" (355). He tells her that he is no longer afraid of death: "it werent nothing to do with death at all it were its very opposite you was my future right away from that moment you was my life" (355). In doing so, he perpetuates his own textual immortality and sets up his story to be read as the very opposite of its proper narrative function. However, the scene is more significant for the way that these narrative manoeuvrings are overtly gendered:

I kissed [Mary] on the neck and on the mouth ...

It is for him I cried thats why you wished me to write [the history].

Its for him!

Or her she said she were smiling and crying.

Or her my love. (354)

This passage not only thwarts the generic convention of the male progeny, but also self-consciously signposts the significance of a feminised reading position. While Chambers accepts that the thematics of seduction normally are underpinned by sexual violence, in the context of his own work he comes close to dismissing this implication as "angry feminist" paranoia. He reasons,

my argument here is about seduction, not as an exploitative effect of power but as an oppositional response to alienation, that is, as a way – the only nonviolent way, perhaps – of turning the alienating other from attitudes that are oppressive ... to a more sympathetic "understanding." (17)

Sexual and narrative seduction occupy discrete realms of power; they nevertheless converge in Carey's text in a way that is undeniably problematic, because the narrative

relies on the patriarchal tradition of the man-as-subject and woman-as-object. Here, the positioning of the absent woman as the literal narratee of a masculine address exploits the gendered implications of seduction and exposes the structural similarity of sexual and narrative desire. The intertextual occasion of *Henry V* is thus burdened with its final functions: to enable a reading of Carey's text as the literal replication of oppositional narrative, and, less transgressively, to highlight its patriarchal underpinnings.

## Chapter 4

### **“Something Worse Than Shoes”: Postcolonial Melancholia**

Soon after Ned’s resignation from his job at the sawmill and symbolic entry into “unselected land” (255), he discovers “the horrid thing who had previously worn a dress” – Steve Hart – “sitting on his horse surveying our achievements in the wilderness.” Ned throws a stone at the horse and threatens to “break [Steve’s] skinny little neck” (260), but he nevertheless allows him to remain at camp, admitting to his daughter that he finds “the bandy little thing” both “disturbing” and “fascinat[ing]” (261). “Why I tolerated them secretive and fervent eyes staring out at me through the smoke,” he writes, “I cannot think” (261). Here, the cross-dresser undoubtedly is the “figure that disrupts” (Garber 103): in this case, it disrupts a romantic nationalist fantasy in which Ned and his men are “building a world where [they] would be left alone” (260). More significantly, the image of Steve’s fervent eyes peering at Ned through the smoke of the campfire – which is reminiscent of his voyeuristic consumption of Mary’s body through the window of his mother’s kitchen – establishes transvestism as a pervasive secret that Ned does not want to uncover.

On a narrative level, the cross-dressing sub-plot is resolved when Mary dramatically reveals that the Sons of Sieve is the Australian descendant of Catholic Irish terrorist group “Molly’s Children,” whose members don masks and dresses to disguise their identities (369). The following night, Ned lies beside Mary on the floor of their hut, tormented into wakefulness by “horrible visions” of his father “with that dress in the tin trunk.” He writes to his daughter:

That is the agony of the Great Transportation that our parents would rather forget what come before so we currency lads is left alone ignorant as tadpoles spawned in puddles on the moon ... I smelt the smoke and ashes of your mother's hair she were a sweet young girl she were a stranger from an ancient time. (373)

Postcolonial narrative is characterised by the willingness to facilitate the “currency” of “ancient time,” to revisit and interrogate the colonial past. Multiple temporal modalities are evident from the opening paragraphs of Ned's story, which position the daughter in an unspecified future age when the “cruelty” of “this present age” is “far away in ancient time” (5). The double remove at which the reader and the daughter encounter the story of transportation is both temporal and spatial: “what come before” is as remote to Ned as a puddle on the moon; Mary is “a stranger from an ancient time” because she is “not long off the boat from home” (269). Ned's sense of spatial and temporal estrangement from his parents' history feeds a characteristically postcolonial tension between “the oppressive memory of the past and the libratory promise of the future” (Durrant 1). As burdened by Steve Hart's nostalgia (261, 279) as by his parents' amnesia, Ned angrily declares that “we would write our own damned history from here on” (328). This new history, however, is haunted by the ghosts of Irish mythology: the Banshee that “come on board the cursed convict ships,” the beloved St Brigit who “wither[s]” beneath the Australian sun (118), and the Irish rat charmer who curses the Kelly family to prove that it “do[es] not know [its] own house and what is in it” (222).

In invoking these Irish ghosts, *True History* also invokes the psychoanalytically inflected understanding of traumatic history as a kind of haunting, a concept that is perhaps most famously fictionalised in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). *True History* produces visceral, embodied sites of selective traumatic memory – what *Beloved*'s Sethe calls “rememory.” Sam Durrant writes in response to *Beloved* that the violated body acts to mediate pathological mourning, or melancholia, in postcolonial narrative, and in *True History* the thematics of bodily violation circulate around the unarticulated trauma of transportation. Ned's opening truth declaration to his daughter is followed by a description of his father as having been “ripped from his home in Tipperary” and “torture[d]” in the prisons of Van Diemen's Land, an experience about which he “never spoke” (5). His parents were “ripped from Ireland like teeth from the mouth of their own history” (118) and the wound festers within his father's body until it is “bulging with all the poisons of the Empire” (43); Ned describes his own experience of imprisonment as having time “cut out of [him]” (224). Paradoxically, the Australian “historic memory of UNFAIRNESS” (404) is passed down to the next generation at the moment of the convicts' traumatic stopping of memory. In this moment, history is “ripped” from the convict's body, but atavistically reiterated in the “bone and marrow” of their children (404). Like the trauma of slavery in Morrison's novel, the settler's corporeal “knowledge of unfairness” (Carey 404) passes itself on “as a *memory of the body* ... because it exceeds both the individual's and the community's capacity for verbalization and mourning” (Durrant 80).

According to David L. Eng, melancholia “has come largely to define how we think about our subjectivities” at the turn of the twenty-first century (1275). Freud's



original distinction between the healthy process of mourning, in which libido is consciously withdrawn from a lost love object and the ego becomes “free and uninhibited again” (245), and the melancholic’s pathological denial of loss, has been appropriated by various critical discourses to theorise unresolved personal and historical grief. In its postcolonial manifestations, the pathologising and therapeutic impetus of Freud’s original theory has been sublimated towards the productive unsettlement of the past, towards “conjur[ing] the dead” before they can be laid to rest (Durrant 9). Critics such as Paul Gilroy, Anne Anlin Cheng, Cynthia Sugars, Ian Almond and Roy Osamu Kamada have used melancholia for different purposes: Cheng, for example, argues that melancholia provides a provocative metaphor for racial relations in northern America (50), while Gilroy sees British melancholia as a means to “transform paralyzing guilt into a more productive shame” (99). Addressing the New Zealand context, Stephen Turner writes that the settler’s pervasive need to “[live] *without history*” (21) gives rise to a “powerful though inarticulate feeling”: the “melancholy of dislocation” (22). His suggestion that the “buried history” of trauma lies within “the malignant cultural body of the settler” is strongly evocative of *True History*’s own “inarticulate melancholy of place” (23), a phenomenon embodied in the text in the frightening Irish “substitute child” and his colonial counterpart, Harry’s messenger boy Shan.

Like the substitute, who is left in the place of a child “taken in the night” from the home of a Tipperary family (150), Shan appears as a “queer” and “frighten[ing]” (144) stranger within an otherwise utopic domestic and agricultural space. Ned enters Shan’s family home to wait for Harry, and is touched by the domestic aesthetics of

roses and “white curtains” (143) and the soothing heteronormativity of an absent father, a devoted mother, and their modest but voluptuous daughter (144). The latter invites Ned to inspect their property; the “grass so green” and the “fat and gleaming” cattle suggest to him “what contentment the colony might provide if there is ever justice” (144). The evocation of utopic imagery is unmistakable in this sequence – the two sit side by side, holding hands and admiring “a spring seeping from the rocks ... with ferns growing from the crevices” (144-45) – and its disruption by the figure of Shan is therefore more pronounced. Ned asks the girl “how old her brother were” and she cryptically responds that he “werent her brother” (144). Similarly, in the house itself, the tone shifts abruptly when Shan begins a “very queer game” of jumping from chair to chair around the dining table as he waits for the rabbit stew his mother has promised him for dinner: “[she] were frightened of him she would not stop it. Often he touched the ceiling with his strange thin fingers although ... the ceilings were 13 ft. high” (144).

Harry eventually arrives to collect Ned and, as they travel through an eerie twilight landscape specifically troped as “melancholy” (150), relates the story of the substitute. This supernatural creature seems to embody a frightening simultaneity of man and woman, human and animal, adult and child. Its “strange [and] wasted appearance” is matched by an unsettling obsession with dress-making; most disturbingly, it has the supernatural ability to “be in many different places in the one time” (150). Shan’s “worn out little face” and faded blue eyes remind Ned of “the children of old fathers” (142), and the substitute similarly disorients conventional developmental and temporal trajectories. This “so called CHILD [has] a wasted

appearance in its eyes” that suggests “it were very old indeed,” but as time passes and its brothers and sisters grow up, it “didn’t age a day” (150).

Shan and the substitute each embody postcolonial melancholia’s “discrepant temporality of nationhood” (Khanna 23), a regressive malignancy at the heart of the national home. Carey evokes a fantasy of national progress – of land cultivation, familial order and material gain – and disrupts it with the devolutionary narrative written on the children’s bodies. The substitute’s capacity to thwart maturity and to inhabit “many different places in the one time” (150) memorialises the “neither-here-nor-there space/time” (Sugars 702) of the settler subject. Most significantly, the substitute emerges on “the eve of the very day [Harry’s mother] were transported” from Ireland (151). Like the Banshee that “thriv[es] like blackberry in the new climate” (118), it transplants and multiplies in the Australian colony, not only manifesting in Shan but in Harry himself, who in a moment of crisis calls himself “the substitute” (156). Harry’s confused identification with the substitute – a word that implies the patient’s failure to find an appropriate “substitute” for the lost love object (Freud 244) as well as “a cultural identity that has been split off from the old country” (Turner 21) – suggests an unarticulated story of trauma that transmits itself from one generation to the next.

For the settler nation, however, postcolonial melancholia is inevitably twofold. If the convict’s violated body bears silent witness to “the Forgetting” (Durrant 6) of its own humanity, and the substitute “marks an experience that is unhistoricizable ... because it repeats itself infinitely” (16), *True History*, as a melancholic settler text, must also memorialise the forgetting of indigenous humanity on which the Australian

nation was built. Haydie Gooder and Jane M. Jacobs argue that the “sorry nation” is characteristically melancholic in that it has suffered the loss of a “properly constituted national selfhood” (235). For the “sorry people” of the late 1990s – *True History*’s contemporary moment – who participated in a nationwide wave of personal and community-based reconciliatory gestures (235), a sense of guilt and responsibility for past wrongs gave rise to a collective impoverishment of the national ego. In concert with Freud’s original supposition that the patient’s complaints are fundamentally accusatory, the postcolonial apology is shadowed by what Gelder and Jacobs call “postcolonial racism” (17): the resentful suspicion that the indigene has “too much ethnicity or an ethnicity that has too much” (99).

This specifically postcolonial amplification of minority politics is characteristic of what Chambers calls a “new kingless world” of diffuse and relativised power, to which the melancholic or “suicidal” oppositional text responds (103). The textually suicidal gesture is defined as the acknowledgement of the “melancholic truth” that “*I (too) am the other* whose power produces me”: my identity is not proper to me, but is a function of my otherness (104). The idea of melancholia as a social text that must be read as a tension between “the self and the self-constituting other(s)” (109) is a useful entry point to the melancholic politics of a particular sequence of the text in which Ned is tricked by his mother into the bushranging apprenticeship with Harry Power. The sequence is striking in that it splits off Ned’s narrative and performative selves by introducing a third strain of subjectivity called “the boy,” a characterisation of his sense of loss, exile and maternal abandonment.

The boy sequence begins with Ned's recurring battle with Bill Frost for the sexual possession of his mother. The Kelly family is celebrating his sister Annie's marriage to Alex Gunn and Ned is "glowering" at the sight of his mother dancing with his "ferret faced" rival (81). Ellen, exploiting the opportunity to which his jealousy gives rise, "abandon[s] her Englishman" and seeks Ned out to ask him if he will "help [her] with Harry," who she knows Ned far prefers as her sexual partner, and the two men leave together on horseback for what Ned thinks will be a short ride and a "yarn" (82). The significance of the mother's trickery is that it goes to the heart of the text's most pervasive concern: the unconsummated desire to possess a sexualised Australian homeland. As he is leaving for what he later discovers is his new life as a criminal, Ned turns for a final look at his mother's "whippy and dangerous" body, "springy as a sapling," pushed close against Frost's (83). The "torment" of this image of her simultaneously natural and dangerous sexuality carries through to the next paragraph in which Ned comes beyond "the limits of his world" and enters the "deeper wilder country" (83) of a "melancholic" (87) psychological landscape.

Like its theatrical trope, *True History's* melancholia manifests micro- and macrotextually: its narrative enactment of melancholia is also discursively signposted. This encompasses not only the word "melancholic" (87), but also a lexicon of sadness and suicide, and a replication of the condition's defining traits. Ned's renaming of himself as "the boy," for instance, evokes the patient's characteristic regression to the narcissism of psychic immaturity; the boy repeatedly suffers from insomnia and, on two occasions, imagines Harry and himself as outcasts. Most significantly, an intense attachment to a love object – the mother – has been abruptly and traumatically severed.

The patient, according to Freud, whose gender-blindness is in this case ironically pronounced, “knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him” (245). The reader, readily equipped with the tools of the analyst, can see what Ned and the boy cannot – that the loss of his mother is a loss of personal and national cohesion, a regression to the wilderness state of melancholic homelessness. Indeed, over ten pages the word “home” appears nineteen times. One instance demonstrates the psychic structure of melancholia and its coincidence with the “pain of homesickness” (92): “the sky was pure and blue but I were now a boy without a home ... every time I seen a cockatoo fence or a ringbarked tree or any signs of a selector’s labour then I felt a great grief rise up in my windpipe” (91-92). The felled or ringbarked tree, fetishised in nineteenth-century settler writing as a “metonymy of home” (Carter 265) and compared elsewhere in the text to “a whole empire collapsing” (124), here signifies the “nightmare of homelessness” (Carter 274). In concert with Freudian orthodoxy, it is not, as in the case of mourning, the world which has become “poor and empty,” but “the ego itself” (Freud 246): the “pure and blue” sky seems to taunt Ned with its offering of hope and redemption.

The sequence’s distinctive schizophrenic voice, which produces the boy as a fictional protagonist in his own autobiographical narrative, draws out a psychological reading practice, one that is attentive to the “elocutionary disappearance” of the individual self and its replacement with “an errant, nomadic textual subject” whose identity fuses with the “wanderings of temporality” (Chambers 115). Read against the backdrop of the melancholic “truth” that “I am the other,” Ned’s search for himself takes him “from moment to moment and from mood to mood, across a landscape of

identity that has no center” (108). As Harry leads him beyond “the limits of selection” (84), his melancholia merges with his experience of the landscape: “that gloomy little clearing in the wattles [was] all the home he had” (86); “I were now a boy without a home my mood lower than the water in the King” (91). It is not so much that the boy’s sense of exile is projected onto the Australian bush as that it emerges, through travel, as a kind of topological mapping: he names the landscape around him – Moyhu, the Great Dividing Range, Wangaratta, the Ovens River, the King River, Oxley – at the same time that he names his “pain,” “grief” (92), and “unsettle[ment]” (91). Carter argues that in colonial travel literature, the road functions as “an extended home promising arrival” (263); here, the boy’s “tracks and ridges” (85) map “the space of departure without arrival to which it is impossible to belong” (Durrant 108-09). If the substitute is a specifically domestic phenomenon, the boy is what Toni Morrison might call “a loneliness that roams” (274). It is also one that breeds: after relating the story of the suicide of the previous owner of the Kelly selection, Harry gestures to a collective impoverishment of the national self and its relationship to a sexualised Australian landscape: “It aint [Bill Frost’s] adjectival farm no more than mine ... Forget your mamma said he. There aint no happiness for neither of us at Eleven Mile Creek” (86).

In this sequence, feet and shoes assume a fetishistic significance, recurring as exchange objects in the battle for power between Harry and his “slave” (93). Between the mention of Bill Frost’s “patent leather dancing shoes” (83) and Ned’s ascension from a “barefoot Irish mutt” (93) ten pages later, boots, shoes, or feet are mentioned twenty-eight times. Boots, in particular, seem to hover around moments of psychic significance for Ned: “I didnt deserve [for my mother to] cast me out. Harry were

holding out the boots to me and in the end what was I to do?” (91). Shoes or their absence recur throughout the text as metonymic signifiers of racial identity. At school his bare feet mark his difference from the “proddies”: “Ned Kelly couldnt spell he had no boots” (33). In the boy sequence, Ned’s rhetorical expression of loss – “what was I to do?” – and acceptance of the boots are followed by a recurrence of the familiar indigenisation trope: he constructs a “mia mia such as the blackfellows build” and competently hunts and butchers a kangaroo (92). In the context of his impressive tracking (85) and hunting (84) skills, and particularly in light of statements such as “I slept very badly thinking how Bill Frost stole my land. Piccaninny dawn were dry and dewless” (92), the racial connotations of the fetishised boots are clear. In this and other parts of the text, however, the subtle implication of sexual difference also circulates around his own and other men’s boots, which are variously described as “soft as a lady’s purse” (145), heeled like “a fancy woman’s shoe” (226), and, in the boy sequence, as “supple as a lady’s glove” (89). The convergence of sexual and racial ambiguity in a particularly masculine garment, and the presence of this ambiguity in the text’s most overt enactments of melancholia, construct a subtle but supple connection between this narcissistic psychic regression and “something worse than shoes” (15): cross-dressing.

Martin’s description of *True History*’s use of literal and figurative cross-dressing as “disturbing” (35) is certainly legitimate, but in more ambivalent ways than she herself explores. Ned’s story is punctuated by tortured, homophobic visions of his father’s “manly features buttoned up inside that cursed dress” (21), an image so traumatising that he cannot “properly make the place for him that he deserves” even



after the Sons of Sieve subplot is ostensibly resolved (21). Following Mary's revelation, Dan and Steve launder their dresses in the "cold mountain stream" Ned describes as "like a poultice drawing out all the ancient poisons" (375). In this moment, Martin argues, the "blackness of Irish Kelly" is "washed off the body," "ripped off like a dress" (38). However, as Ned himself reveals, Mary's story is not sufficient to fix the "place" of the cross-dressing in a "properly" (21) heteronormative order of meaning. Martin fails to recognise the subversive tension to which the dual operation of literal and figurative cross-dressing gives rise: the motif's omnipresence in the text, and the propensity for its narrative and discursive elements to spill into each other, cannot be contained by Mary's story or the gang members' gesture of heteronormative absolution.

Cross-dressing is the text's repressed unconscious, the buried trunk or closed door Ned "[does] not wish to open" (261), but it also functions more complexly as a secret but unbounded contagion that passes from individual to individual, from discourse to discourse, and from narrative to textual functions. The properly located figure of the man in the dress is superseded by the sprawling discursive function of the dress itself, which dominates the story and seeps into the language in which it is told. Dresses, for instance, are the catalyst for Ned's relationship with Mary (263-66) and a central feature of their first sexual encounter (270-71), but they also appear in expressions such as "It were like living in a cupboard full of dresses" (9) and "he were as weepy as a girl with a gravy stain on her ballgown" (249). In the penultimate "parcel," the Kelly armour – an icon of Australian identity made famous by Sidney Nolan's paintings and put on display for a perplexed international audience at the

opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games – comes into being through a metaphor of dress-making and is worn in conjunction with blackface (449). Ned makes the templates for the first “ironclad suit” from “fresh peeled stringybark just as women use the paper for a dress” (441) and tells Steve that “this is what them Mollys should of worn” (438); in doing so, he circumvents a real resolution to the Sons of Sieve subplot. *True History*’s transvestism and transracialism is certainly “disturbing”: not because it can be “dispelled and displaced” by “the over-invested custom-made garments of Australian nationalism, the Kelly armour” (Martin 314), but because it passes into, or even as, that nationalism.

The idea of “passing” takes on multiple meanings in this context. One of the most unsettling aspects of the transvestism is Ned’s propensity to mistake men in drag for female members of his family. On one of these occasions, “Kate and Maggie” arrive at camp, and it is only when one of them “passe[s]” into full view that he realises they are actually his brother in “a bright blue dress his face blacked from ear to ear” and “the smudge lipped culprit Steven Hart” (262). This scene draws attention to the politics of passing, and invites the reader to read the blackface and transvestism in the context of the Irish-Australian settler’s claim to indigeneity. Earlier in the text, Harry and Ned – who has momentarily become “the boy” (158) – attempt to disguise themselves by “blackening” their faces with “filthy ashes” (159). Again, this scene highlights the relationship between transracialism and indigenisation when Harry tells Ned: “this will make you a good citizen my little feral fellow” (159).

However, the meaning of “passing” exceeds the text’s (anti-)indigenising impetus in the sense that it also encompasses the disturbing propensity for transvestism

and blackface to pass like a virus between individuals. In the text's most spectacular and protracted Sons of Sieve sequence, in which Ned is absent but curiously positioned in an omniscient authorial vantage point, the uninitiated Joe returns to the gang's hiding place to discover Steve and Dan in "dainty little dress[es] of black & orange lace" (355). Dan starts to "black his face by some recipe previously concocted" and Joe inexplicably accepts the ash, "urgently smearing it across his face," even as he exclaims aloud in confusion, "What the eff is this [?]" (357). Later in the same scene, the men steal through the bush, "lifting the hem[s] of [their] dress[es]" with one hand and "holding [their] Webley[s]" in the other (359), to negotiate with a group of Aboriginal trackers. In an extravagantly farcical tableau, the Irish men in their lace and ash paste converse with two Aborigines "natty in tweed" and "police issue" boots (360), and Joe momentarily becomes Ned Kelly:

You know my name uncle?

I reckon you Ned Kelly boss.

You know what Ned Kelly does to traps uncle. (361)

The most disturbing aspect of this sequence is the way in which Ned – offering a detailed account of an experience from which he was excluded – fleetingly inhabits Joe's body, which in turn carries an unwilled and illegible transracial inscription. Ned is denied the opportunity to hear his father's explanation for his transvestism and repeatedly refuses to hear Steve and Dan's; Joe, in a similarly perplexing manner, declines to ask his friends why they are wearing women's clothes. This tendency for transvestism to transmit itself like a secret social contagion draws attention to its relationship to postcolonial melancholia.

The word “melancholia” or “melancholic” appears five times in *True History*, and in each instance, a direct relationship to actual or figurative cross-dressing is established. In his first encounter with Steve in drag, Ned mistakes him for his mother and chases him on horseback across the “melancholic landscape” of Laceby Plains (232). He later discovers Dan with “his face smudged with charcoal” and “dressed for battle” in a “bright red sash” (319); Ned “cuff[s]” him and they ride together into “melancholy country much abused by miners” (320). The predominance of boots in the boy sequence establishes a less explicit connection, as does the substitute’s obsession with sewing in Harry’s story (150). The most pronounced coincidence of cross-dressing and melancholia occurs during the “hateful reign” of O’Neil, the police sergeant who mocks the eleven-year-old Ned for his lack of shoes and torments him with slanderous stories about his father (11-13). The Kelly boys are watching some Aboriginal stockmen – “effing niggers” (14) – driving cattle to auction and listening to the animals’ “particular mournful bellowing” (13) when Sergeant O’Neil arrives on horseback. Again, footwear functions to mediate racial otherness: the “Ulsterman” (11) O’Neil rides in “the English fashion” with his stirrups held with the tips of his riding boots, while Ned is sure that Patchy Moran’s remark about the Aborigines’ “adjectival boots” will lead to “comments about [his] own bare feet” (15). O’Neil, however, has “something worse than shoes” to hurt Ned with, telling him that he has just seen his father “wearing a dress with roses on its hem ... off to be serviced by his husband” (15-16). Ned declares that he “did not come to see a nigger show” and walks home with his brothers in “melancholic” silence (16).

The melancholic nation is defined by the compulsion to own the truth of its past, and *True History* places cross-dressing at the heart of this truth-telling enterprise. Following O'Neil's taunt, Ned excavates the trunk containing his father's dresses, and tells his daughter, "I lost my own father from a secret" (21). The loss of his father to the "lies and silences" (5) surrounding his transvestism is established in the first paragraph of the narrative as its driving force – Ned wants to prevent his daughter from inheriting lies and silences about her own father. Multiple forms of cross-dressing converge in the "nigger show" (16), the moment at which the transvestism is revealed: Aborigines in "flash red scarves" and "elastic-sided boots" (14), barefoot and victimised Irish settlers, a Protestant Ulsterman dressed in the regalia of English colonial power, and a man in a woman's dress. The "truth" with which Ned seeks to authorise his speaking position is not the truth of his father's heterosexuality and masculinity, or of his innocence of the crimes with which history has charged him, but the melancholic truth of a national identity constructed other-wise.

The patent racial hatred of the "nigger show" is eclipsed by a uniquely postcolonial blend of guilt, resentment, and desire: "we was raised to think the blacks the lowest of the low but they had boots not us and we damned and double damned them as we run" (14). In this sense, the "nigger show" dramatises "the otherness of the self and the 'selfness' of the other" (Chambers 147): not because it grants indigenous legitimacy to a barefoot and brutalised white majority, but because it speaks of a social and political landscape in which "it has become difficult, if not strictly impossible, to distinguish the 'minor' self from the 'major' other" (144). Throughout *True History*, the donning of women's dresses and blackface gestures to the Australian nation's

melancholic outreach to the other: just as male-dominated postcolonial nationalism needs symbolic femininity to “invok[e] the modern nation into being” (Boehmer 26), it also, in the context of the “sorry” nation, needs the indigene, who alone “has the power to forgive and, through that forgiveness, restore the wholeness of the settler’s sense of proper belonging” (Gooder and Jacobs 244). If the melancholic text presents itself as a “site of collective enunciation, in which discourses meet and cross without underpinning in an individual subject” (Chambers 128), the propensity of the cross-dressing to dissolve autonomous subjectivity by passing between individuals and between discourses of difference infects *True History* with a potentially political melancholic strain.

The crux of the melancholic text’s oppositional impact, however, is its ability to pass between the textually constructed roles of writer and reader. Chambers defines narrative suicide as textually contagious: the narrator’s self-sacrifice of autonomous subjectivity must be mirrored by the reader’s suicidal relinquishment of a position identified with the discourse of power (112). In order to break free from its own disabling pathology, to transmute from a psychoanalytical to a political text, melancholia must appeal to the reader for “sympathetic, and indeed complicitous reading; so that the text becomes a site of a complex rhetorical operation aimed at the conversion of the reader” (111). Chambers elucidates the phenomenon of the double suicide in a metaphor of madness and medical science: the reader must be seduced away from the position of power represented by the alienating, diagnostic discourse of medical science and into the discourse of madness itself (112). In the context of postcolonial theory, Chambers’ metaphor of pathology and diagnosis is reminiscent of

a power play between critic and subject, intellectual and subaltern. McClintock argues that in the wake of Bhabha, postcolonial critics risk deactivating the historical agency of actual groups and individuals by focusing exclusively on the internal discursive ambivalence of colonial power. She asks if “the relation between postcolonial critic and colonial discourse itself [is] a form of mimicry, miming the relation between psychoanalyst and client – the same, but not quite?” (73). By drawing attention to the relationship between the textual madness of discursive ambivalence and the diagnostic textual analyst, McClintock also draws attention to the relationship between the critical practices of psychoanalysis and postcolonialism.

Freud presented pathology as a regression to an earlier stage of libidinal development that was synonymous with a regression to the primitive stages of humankind’s social and cultural development: as the male European child “relived the early stages of savagery,” the colonised savage “lived out the infancy of the human race” (Brickman 56-57). The innate archaic heritage of enthrallment, timelessness and undifferentiation that lurks in mature European unconscious may be compared, Freud tells us, to “an aboriginal population in the mind” (qtd. in Brickman 60). In this context, the central irony of *True History*’s oppositional practice is thrown into relief: its major strategy of postcolonial resistance draws its authority from theories of evolutionary racism. On the one hand, McClintock argues convincingly that the “disciplinary cordon sanitaire” between psychoanalysis and colonialism is a product of abjection (72). Psychoanalysis, she explains, is haunted by the abjected elements of its “family romance”: female sexuality, class, empire and racial difference (72); at the same time, material history repudiates “unruly elements” such as the unconscious and

sexual desire. She calls for a mutual critical engagement – a “*situated psychoanalysis*” (72) – that is at once a “decolonizing of psychoanalysis and a psychoanalyzing of colonialism” (74). As a literary representation of postcolonial melancholia, however, *True History* is caught in an impasse between madness and diagnosis, colonial power and postcolonial resistance, because its oppositional impact depends on the reader / critic surrendering a position in the discourse of (colonial) power that is psychoanalysis. *True History*’s significant oppositional potential is ultimately inhibited by its failure to negotiate this paradoxical dialectic.

The crucial point of textual oppositionality is its readability: the melancholic text must successfully appeal for a suicidal reading in order for readers to “catch” melancholia (Chambers 128) and for their “landscape of desire” to be irreversibly altered (245). It is for this reason that reading oppositional narrative is only ever reading the oppositional in narrative, “a reading that both produces that oppositionality and is responsive to it” (6). Each of *True History*’s major oppositional strategies – its entanglement of corporeality and textuality, its thwarting of desire for the motherland, its staging of history, and its postcolonial melancholia – provides the reader with the relevant analytical tools. The reader is assailed, for instance, by the motherland trope’s conflation of woman and land; the theatrical trope repeatedly signals its own significance, as does the trope of the textual corpse. Ultimately, *True History* does not so much enact melancholia – mourn “inconsolabl[y] *before* history” (Durrant 24) – so much as enforce a psychoanalytical reading practice that closes down its oppositional room for manoeuvre at the very site of its greatest potential. The reader is thus interpolated into the discourse of (colonial) power that diagnoses “madness,” rather



than into the (postcolonial) discourse of “madness” itself. If the oppositional “always necessarily fights on terrain it has not chosen” (Chambers 5), *True History*’s relentless self-reflexiveness and restricted reading practice – its refusal to give readerly ground – results in its own oppositional paralysis.

### **“The Dead Man’s Sentences”: Conclusion**

In the months following the siege at Glenrowan, Thomas Curnow is forced to live under police protection. As the narrator ironically observes, this is “curious treatment for a hero”: Curnow is hurt by the public’s failure to recognise his role in Ned’s downfall and infuriated by the “continuing, ever-growing adoration of the Kelly Gang” (472). “What is it about we Australians, eh?” he fumes. “Might not we find someone better to admire than a horse-thief and a murderer?” (472). In private, the narrator tells us, his relationship with Ned is more complicated, and

the souvenir he carried from Glenrowan seems to have made its own private demands upon his sympathy. The evidence provided by the manuscripts suggests that in the years after the Siege of Glenrowan he continued to labour obsessively over the construction of the dead man’s sentences, and it was he who made those small grey pencil marks with which the original manuscript is decorated. (472)

This passage hints at a broader theoretical debate, one that extends beyond the vexed question of Kelly’s historical status as hero or villain. In what ways can oppositional narrative live beyond the death of its authoritarian discourse, beyond the narrator and narratee in relationship, and make successful demands upon the sympathies of its reader? Crucially, can these “private” demands become public, and effect social change? A defining paradox of *True History* is its propensity to dictate its oppositional messages. However, this paradox (as Chambers might say) has a paradox of its own, because “no discourse can ‘dictate’ its meanings absolutely” (235). The image,

therefore, of Curnow labouring over the dead man's sentences, serves as a reminder of the ongoing readability of oppositional narrative, and that Carey's text cannot be closed off by any individual reading or theoretical approach.

*True History* both challenges and contributes to the immense cultural significance of the Kelly story to Australian nationalist discourse; specifically, it exploits Kellymania as part of its postmodern and postcolonial challenge to history. Carey criticism has been somewhat preoccupied by the "explosive triad" (Lamb 26) of *True History*'s cultural authority – its subject matter, celebrity-status author and Booker Prize win – at the expense of a sustained postcolonial reading. This is symptomatic of the theoretical paucity of Carey criticism more broadly. For Graeme Turner, the discourses of mass-mediated nationalism that circulate around Carey's celebrity status spell conservative doom for the Australian literary canon: "The prospect of a succession of national heroes writing their fiction for an audience whose conservative expectations are easily satisfied but rarely extended," he writes, "is not an attractive one" (138). Carey's national-hero status demands to be challenged by sustained postcolonial criticism that moves beyond the politically disabling category of the nation to join a transnational literary and cultural debate. Such an approach would enable Carey's fiction to be positioned alongside canonical works by other postcolonial authors such as Salman Rushdie and J.M. Coetzee, and perhaps more importantly, alongside the literatures of other settler nations.

Indeed, a reading of *True History* as a settler text begs a number of difficult questions of crucial importance to the field of settler studies itself. Specifically, the text invites closer attention to the relationship between Ireland and Australia as settler

societies; it highlights not only the similarities between discourses of Aboriginal and Irish racial otherness, but also the Irish diaspora in Australia. Carey's text offers a useful conduit through which to consider the efficacy of grouping nations together according to their shared history of indigenous displacement and dispossession, and to the largely unexplored question of the relationship between diasporic and indigenous identities in postcolonial Australia.<sup>1</sup> Both these notions are embodied by Ellen Kelly, who functions as a site of desire for an Irish-Australian postcolonial nationalism. The motherland is one of the more familiar tropes of postcolonial literature and theory; it is widely accepted amongst literary scholars that "gender forms *the* formative dimension for the construction of nationhood" (Boehmer 22). Given its reliance on the metaphors of home, birth and origins, can the motherland trope function more transgressively in the literature of Australia and other settler nations? Furthermore, *True History* raises a number of compelling questions about gender and sexuality that might usefully be approached from the perspective of queer and performance theories.

*True History* is a profoundly performative text. Its arresting use of the trope of theatre – which Carey deploys more overtly in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994) – suggests that there is room for a literary investigation into the relationship between theatre and history, one that might compliment Carter's and Denning's historical approaches. Concurrently, further study into the role of cross-dressing in Australian literature would build on contributions by critics such as Diana Brydon<sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> This issue was the focus of Lee-Von Kim's paper, "Revisiting the 'Uneasy Conversation': The Diasporic and the Indigenous in Postcolonial Australia," at the Fifth Galway Conference on Colonialism: Settler Colonialism, at the NUI, Galway, 27-30 June 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See "'Empire Bloomers': Cross-Dressing's Double Cross" and "Trousered Women: Cross-Dressing in Some Contemporary Australian and Canadian Texts."

Joanne Tompkins.<sup>1</sup> However, the most pressing question *True History*'s cross-dressing raises is neither new nor easily dismissed: in what ways can psychoanalytical and postcolonial theories usefully collaborate? Particularly in light of current interest in theories of trauma and melancholia, the specific function of psychoanalysis in settler theory demands ongoing attention. The problematics of using psychoanalysis to interrogate racial discourses cannot be overcome simply by acknowledging that it is "a colonial discipline" (Khanna 6), but neither can its immense and diffuse impact on literary theory be denied. In what ways does psychoanalysis politically equip or disable settler studies? In other words, do we risk reducing the settler subject to nothing more than a bundle of neuroses?

These kinds of questions return, ultimately, to the grand dilemma of how to effect social change in a post-revolutionary world. It has been suggested that melancholia is the defining neurosis of the twentieth-century *fin de siècle* (Eng); perhaps the textual contagion of oppositional narrative is the contemporary era's crucial strategy of resistance.

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<sup>3</sup> See "Dressing Up/Dressing Down: Cultural Transvestism in Post-Colonial Drama."

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